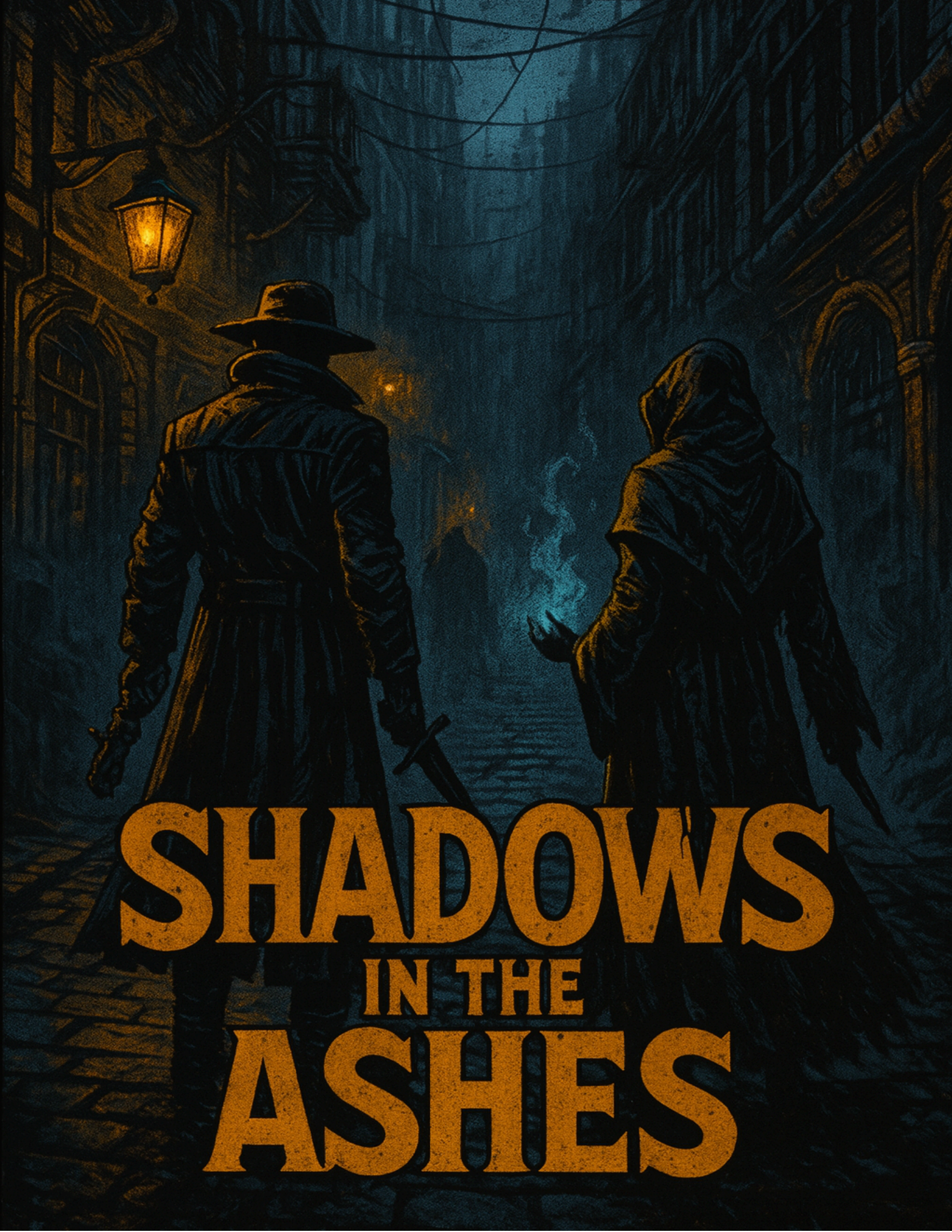
SHADOWS
IN THE
ASHES

About This Book

Shadows in the Ashes is a parallel tale to *Ashes of the Unseen*, unfolding in the same haunted city of Doskvol but through a different set of eyes. Where *Ashes* followed the Crows clawing their way through fate and fire, this book turns inward to the Cyphers, to Arthur Xavier, and to the darker gears of conspiracy grinding beneath the city's fog.

Arthur's path is not one of outlaw camaraderie but of obsession—chasing blueprints, whispers, and ghosts through smoke-choked alleys and secret sanctums. While the Crows spill blood in the open, Arthur digs through the silence, uncovering weapons that spread not fire but control, names that bind factions together, and shadows that may stretch back to Merrow Valesque himself.

Written with the same episodic pulse, each chapter sharpens into mystery and revelation, secrets piled like ash until their weight threatens to crush both hunter and hunted. The story moves in parallel to *Ashes of the Unseen*, threading into the same city and conflicts but carving a distinct path: one of obsession, betrayal, and the cost of seeing too much.

What begins as investigation becomes revelation—and what lurks in the ashes may burn darker than fire ever could.

Shadows in the Ashes
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Dedication
For the selves we imagine, and the ones who imagine us back — and for the shadows of those I no longer speak to, may they know they mattered.

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Part I – Sparks in the Dark…

Chapter 1: **An Instrument of Fire**

Doskvol holds its breath.

For the first time in months, the city's engines don't scream—they idle. The smoke still comes, of course, curling low over the canals and brickwork, but the flames are memory now, an afterimage on the undersides of clouds. You can taste the lull if you know what you're tasting for: not peace, exactly—just pressure held in a boiler that hasn't burst yet.

By day, coal grit clings to everything that stands still long enough to be claimed: the iron mouths of cranes along the docks, the leaning gutters that never quite carry the rain away, the sleeves of laborers rinsed gray by work and weather. By night, the gas lamps knife through fog in triangles of sickly gold while newer filaments buzz above them—thin wires strung from parapet to parapet like stitches across a wound. Electricity is a young god here; people are learning its rites. Lines multiply overhead every week, tied into junction boxes that creak when barges pass, feeding light to shops that used to close at dusk and to tenements that never sleep. The current hums, steady and knowable, a comfort to anyone who trusts the math more than the mutter of charms. From an engineer's eye the place is a machine—old parts married to new. Steam injectors cough beside electroplasm conduits; rust and ritual keep company because neither can quite do without the other. Ghost-fuel runs through vacuum tubes sealed with sigils, and the city pretends that makes it science. Magic, when it shows its hand, remains what it has always been: volatile, imprecise, a liar under the right conditions. The tools that bend it—spirit cages, lightning-hook trawls, whisper-wards chalked under eaves—work well enough until they don't. Better a switch you can throw and a pressure gauge you can read than a promise from a mask.

The streets remember the burn. The Royal Family set half a district alight not long ago and called it a performance. They're gone now—taken in a sweep that felt too neat to be anything but arranged. A dozen versions of the story circulate with the morning bread: that the Gloam Sisters and the Ember Circle, allies when it suits them, handed Merrow over to the cells; that old enemies found a use for the law, just this once. The arithmetic doesn't balance, but the city rarely does. Still, the fires are out. People walk a little slower to work. Vendors test the morning air before opening shutters. Even rumor moves with a limp. Crime hasn't stopped; it's only settled into districts the way silt settles into a riverbed. Everyone knows whose colors matter on which corners. The Circle's sigils stain the brick near the refineries; the Cyphers' safehands keep to Gloamhaven alleys where the light is better and the cameras don't always point the right way. Between those borders the rest of Doskvol breathes as it can. There's a map of loyalties drawn in things you can smell—ozone from a cracked insulator, hot oil from a mill that won't shut down, sewage backing up from pipes that never learned the names of the men who laid them. The sun doesn't arrive so much as lighten the fog a shade; the moon is a rumor behind coal weather. Above, the cables sag with dew and soot. Below, tunnels sigh—old drainage, old chapel crypts, old mistakes layered like strata. Some of them carry contraband. Some carry voices. Some carry nothing you should follow.

If there's order here, it isn't written. It lives in the hands that keep the city from shaking itself apart: the riveter's rhythm, the switchman's timing, the saboteur's patience. Doskvol can be made to function. It always has been. For now, the dials hover just under red, and the hum in the wires is almost reassuring. Almost.

Arthur sat with his elbows braced against the polished wood of the Shadow's Den's bar, his gloved fingers tapping a steady rhythm that only he seemed to hear. The air was close in here, thick with the mingled perfume of pipe smoke, spilled gin, and damp coats still carrying the fog from outside. Shadows bled into each other across the velvet curtains, blurring the edges of the

room until it felt less like a tavern and more like a cavern where secrets were mined and bartered. He let his gaze follow Ezra's steady movements—broad shoulders framed by candlelight as he poured another measure, slid another glass across the bar—but his mind was far from the easy clink of coins and chatter of patrons.

The Ember Circle. They always managed to carve their presence into Arthur's thoughts no matter how carefully he compartmentalized. A cult, he called them, though their devotees would no doubt name themselves zealots, martyrs, holy warriors. It was all the same—men and women burning away their reason at Emberlash's command, throwing themselves into fire like kindling if he so much as raised a hand. Arthur had fought zeal before; you could outmaneuver greed, predict pride, manipulate fear. But zeal was a calculus that rarely added up. It demanded sacrifice without reason, death without hesitation. And that made them dangerous in a way no gang ledger could account for.

He thought of Emberlash, that pyromancer's shadow looming larger in rumor than in flesh, and how Lannic Morrow's eyes always hardened at the mere mention of his name. Arthur had never pried—loyalty was loyalty, and some questions earned only silence—but he knew there was a story there, something that burned between them like an ember buried under ash. Perhaps a betrayal. Perhaps a war long before the one Doskvol now staggered through. Whatever it was, Lannic carried it like a brand across his back, and the Circle's hatred of the Cyphers never wavered.

Arthur took a slow sip of his drink, letting the burn of cheap liquor coat his tongue, and let his thoughts drift to the fragments currently locked in a Cypher workshop, awaiting further study. Metal shards, warped and half-melted, that when assembled into their proper design revealed something sickeningly simple and terrifyingly effective. An egg of steel, heavy enough to fit solid in a man's hand, smooth save for the channels cut through its casing. A mechanism built not to pierce or shatter but to belch fire outward in every direction at once. A weapon meant for a crowded street, a theater, a market square. Not to kill cleanly—no, never cleanly—but to make a spectacle of death, to turn human beings into fuel for their own damn inferno.

He imagined one planted at the base of a refinery tower, or hidden beneath the benches of a tram station. A single egg, enough to turn the place into a screaming furnace. Half a dozen scattered across Doskvol? The city would be unlivable. Panic would spread faster than flame, and every shadow, every alley, would reek of ash. The Circle's message would not just be heard—it would be carved into bone and soot.

Arthur set his glass down and flexed his hand against the wood of the bar. He hated that his mind always ran to the practical, to the logistics of how such a thing could be used. Hated that he could see so clearly the devastation their design promised. But this was his burden: to anticipate the shape of their malice, to pick apart the threads of their machines before those threads were woven into nightmares. That egg haunted him more than the Circle's chants or Emberlash's name ever could. Because he understood it. He understood its efficiency. And efficiency was a language he spoke fluently.

Ezra finished with his customers down the bar, collected coins in his massive hand, and turned back, that quiet authority in his every step. Arthur studied him from beneath his lowered brow, the way his shadow stretched across the candlelit counter, the calm menace in his silence. Ezra Nightshade knew more than he ever let on; Arthur had learned that much already. And tonight, he would have to coax those secrets free, pry them loose with patience and pressure. Because if Ezra knew anything about these fire eggs—if the Shadow's Den had caught even the faintest rumor—Arthur needed it. For the city. For the Cyphers. For the daughters he'd sworn would never breathe smoke the way he did.

As Ezra approached, Arthur straightened, forcing the turmoil of his thoughts into the still mask he wore so well. The shadows stretched long around them, the hum of voices dulled to a background drone, and in his mind the fragments of that broken weapon gleamed like hot iron. Tonight, he promised himself, he'd find the answers buried in Ezra's silence. Because fire, once loosed, was not a thing easily caged.

Ezra's heavy boots thudded softly against the floorboards as he returned, the weight of his presence cutting through the low murmur of the den. His shadow stretched across Arthur's glass, blotting out the faint amber reflection of the liquor. He leaned forward, one thick hand braced against the bar, the other holding a rag that smelled faintly of old gin and pipe ash. His voice came low, gravel ground against stone. "If you're finished, Xavier, best be on your way."

Arthur tilted his head without lifting it, his lips curling faintly around the rim of his glass before he set it down with a measured clink. "Well, with this drink? Yes, I'm finished." He let the words linger just long enough, then added, his tone dry as coal smoke, "But why are you so eager to shove away a paying customer?" With a slow flick of his fingers, he signaled for another pour.

Ezra's jaw tightened, but he reached for the bottle all the same. The candlelight caught on the glass as he tipped it, the golden stream spilling into Arthur's cup with a soft hiss against the old wood. "Because," Ezra muttered, the rag twisting in his other hand, "you're not just a customer tonight. You're a nosy bastard asking questions you don't want to hear answers to. And believe me, Xavier, it's for your own good."

Arthur exhaled through his nose, a short, sharp sound of disbelief, like steam escaping a pipe. He wrapped his hand around the fresh drink but didn't sip, his eyes narrowing as the liquid trembled faintly in the glass. "So you do know something. About a new weapon the Ember Circle's been cooking up."

Ezra's gaze slid sideways, sharp and cautious, as if checking the corners of the room for ears that might not be there. His mouth pulled into a hard line. "Maybe I do," he said slowly, drawing out the words, "but mostly I don't. Not for what you're paying, anyway."

Arthur leaned forward, the leather of his coat creaking softly as his shoulders shifted. He let the silence between them stretch, then scoffed under his breath. "We both know I've given you more coin than this information's worth, Ezra."

Ezra didn't rise to the bait. He turned his back on Arthur instead, shoulders squared, his rag scrubbing at an already-clean spot on the bar. For a long moment, the only sounds were the dull hum of voices in the den and the faint crackle of candle wicks. Arthur's eyes followed Ezra's movements, calculating, patient as a man watching gears turn in a machine.

Finally, Ezra sighed, the sound heavy, resigned. He leaned in just enough that only Arthur could hear. "Look, Xavier," he said, voice thick with warning, "we both know the Circle's men aren't to be trifled with."

Arthur's answer came flat, calm, and without hesitation. "I know."

Ezra's lips twitched at the edges, not quite a smile, not quite a frown. He leaned back, reaching for another glass though he didn't need it. "Then why not try the Stoneborn? Or the Gloam Sisters' alchemists. Those women deal with the kind of tech and substances you're sniffing after. But mark me—poke too hard into their business and you'll find yourself in a grave before you see what you're hunting for. And those brats in the Stoneborn?" He let out a low grunt, shaking his head. "Experts at stealing, sure, petty crime their bread and butter. One of 'em might even slip you a working prototype if you're lucky."

Arthur lowered his gaze to the drink before him, the lamplight catching faint sparks of amber in the depths. He turned the glass slowly, watching the liquid spiral, the faint tremor of reflection in his eyes. His voice, when it came, was quiet, tinged with the weight of disappointment. “Ezra, I’ve already been down those roads. None of them lead where I need to go. My investigation…” He paused, the glass halting in his hand. “It’s running out of options.”

Ezra looked at him for a long, measured moment, his face cast in half-shadow by the wavering candlelight. Then he shook his head, slow and deliberate, like a man closing a door. “Then there’s not much I can do to help you, Arthur.”

He pushed away from the bar, the boards creaking under his weight as he drifted back down the line toward other patrons. His broad shoulders swallowed the light as he went, leaving Arthur alone again with his glass, the taste of unfinished answers bitterer than the liquor itself.

Arthur sat motionless for a while, the din of the room folding back over him. The chatter, the clinking glasses, the lazy strains of some half-forgotten tune—all of it seemed to fade under the weight of his thoughts. He tipped the drink back in one long swallow, the burn searing his throat, and set the empty glass down with care. His reflection in the polished surface of the bar looked colder than he felt. Ezra wouldn’t talk. Not yet. And if words wouldn’t open doors, then perhaps it was time to break them down.

Arthur drained the last of his glass, the liquor burning low in his chest as the decision hardened within him. The time for whispers and half-truths was finished. Ezra had given him nothing but dust, and Arthur suspected the barkeep didn’t truly know more than he’d already said. If the Ember Circle guarded its secrets so jealously, then Arthur would simply take them. He would pry the truth from one of their zealots directly, capture a soldier in the alleys, drag the knowledge out of him if he had to. Torture wasn’t his first choice—he still carried enough humanity to hate the thought—but he had seen enough of Doskvol to know that mercy seldom opened locked doors. He hoped it would not come to that, but he was ready if it did.

His gaze swept across the den one last time, lingering on the murk of faces half-hidden in the candlelight. The smoke curled thick in the air, wrapping around the shoulders of gamblers, mercenaries, and drunks who sought their comfort in the shadows. None of them mattered to him tonight. He had a plan forming in his head already, lines sketching themselves like blueprints on the inside of his mind: the narrow streets he could use for cover, the choke points, the tools in his satchel that could make a soldier of the Circle scream his secrets.

Arthur rose from the barstool, his chair scraping faintly across the worn wood floor. He shrugged into his coat, the heavy leather falling over his frame like armor, and for the first time tonight, he let himself look like what he truly was: a man built for hard work and harder decisions. His shoulders were broad, muscles corded from years of labor and tinkering, his arms carrying the quiet strength of someone who knew machines and men broke under pressure if you pushed them the right way. His shirt clung damp with the heat of the den, sleeves rolled to reveal forearms scarred from burns and chemical splatters, the tattoos of his trade faded beneath soot and time. His face was severe, carved in hard lines, the black beard trimmed but rough enough to mark him as working class, his dark eyes fixed forward with a steady intensity that never seemed to soften. There was no flourish in his movements, no wasted energy—only the efficiency of a man who had built, broken, and rebuilt enough things to know what counted.

The low light glimmered faintly in his hair, already streaked with early strands of gray, and though his expression remained calm, there was something in his gaze—something bitter, sharp, and unyielding—that marked him as dangerous to anyone who crossed his path. As he buttoned the coat across his chest, the weight of the tools and hidden implements within seemed to pull him straighter, grounding him like the frame of a machine.

Arthur gave the den one last glance, not for nostalgia but for calculation, then stepped into the fog-wrapped streets of Doskvol. The air outside was colder, damp, filled with the stink of oil and coal, but it suited him. He pulled the collar of his coat up against the mist and walked with measured purpose, his mind already sifting through streets, timings, and opportunities. An ambush had to be set. A soldier had to be taken. The Ember Circle had hidden their fire long enough.

Arthur had learned patience the way other men learned prayer—through repetition, through necessity, through the quiet gnawing ache of waiting for something to break loose. A week of watching this street, measuring its rhythm, mapping the pattern of boots and shadows. By now he knew which lamp burned low at midnight, which sewer grate sighed when the fog pressed down too heavy, which constable made his rounds just late enough that it left a gap you could slip a knife through. He sat hunched on the stone lip of a stairwell east of Brightstone and west of Ashmere Hall University, the part of the city where old wealth bled into young ambition. The stones here were cut cleaner than in the Docks, the lamps taller, the gutters swept just enough to pass for respectable. But respectability was only another coat of paint on Doskvol's rot. The gangs still came here, just dressed finer, carried themselves with straighter backs.

Ahead, through the trees and the wrought-iron gates, the manor loomed like a relic of a different age. Lord Veylock's house. Arthur had never set foot inside, had no wish to, but he knew what the criminals whispered—that the place was older than most of Brightstone itself, older even than the city's iron skeleton. The stonework seemed to breathe in the night air, the carvings catching light like they'd been polished just yesterday. Columns like watchmen framed the entrance, and the gardens stretched wider than some entire districts' courtyards. Elegant, yes. Expensive, certainly. But Arthur saw something else: fortifications. The way the hedges ran high enough to break sightlines, the way the walls didn't just rise—they leaned ever so slightly, forcing any climber into an angle that slowed their hands. Cameras tucked into shadows, wards that made the air itch if you stepped too close. It was a palace dressed as a fortress, or perhaps the other way around. Veylock didn't bother pretending he was just another lord in Brightstone. Everyone knew whose ground this was.

And that was the reason Arthur had chosen it. The Ember Circle, for all their firebrand bravado, respected Veylock's area. Or perhaps they'd made some bargain with the man in the manor, Arthur didn't much care. What mattered was the routine. Every third night, three of Emberlash's zealots walked this street, straight-backed and smug, like men who believed the city bent to their stride. They made their rounds, not as protectors but as predators, collecting coin from shopkeepers and professors, reminding Doskvol's better class that fear was a form of currency too. The merchants called it "protection," though everyone knew the Circle protected only themselves. The Imperial Police might arrest one on occasion, but the charges never held. Emberlash had his ways—bribes, threats, perhaps something worse. The Circle always slipped the noose.

Arthur had no illusions about what these men were. He'd seen zeal in their eyes before. Not greed, not desperation—zeal. It made them hard to predict, harder still to break. But machines broke eventually, no matter how tightly wound. He tapped his gloved fingers against his knee, the gesture small, controlled, while he studied the street's geometry one more time. Three men. Narrow lane. Fog tonight, thicker than most. Plenty of cover if you knew how to use it. He didn't need all three. One was enough. One body captured, one mind cracked open. With the right pressure—pliers, acid, or just the promise of either—a man's secrets came loose. He didn't want to go that far. Torture wasn't art, it was wasteful, imprecise. But if that was the price for answers, Arthur would pay it. Better a single zealot screaming in a cellar than a hundred innocents burning in a marketplace.

His eyes flicked toward the manor gates again. The torches burned steady, throwing long shadows across the cobbled street. Inside, the silhouette of Veylock's estate waited, patient and watchful. Arthur wasn't here for Veylock, not tonight, but he couldn't help wondering what the old vulture thought of these games being played outside his door. Did he care at all, or was it all part of some ledger Arthur would never see? Questions for another night. Tonight, there was only the ambush. The Circle's soldiers would come, like they always did, and Arthur would be waiting.

He adjusted the collar of his coat, pulling it higher against the damp fog, and leaned back into the shadow of the stairwell. His tools weighed steady against his side, the shape of steel and powder familiar, comforting. The plan was simple: isolate one, silence the other two long enough to drag a body into the dark. After that, the real work would begin.

Arthur exhaled slowly, watching the breath vanish into the mist. He had waited long enough. Tonight the investigation moved forward. Tonight the Ember Circle would give up its secrets, one way or another.

Arthur kept his body loose, posture casual, the picture of a man with nothing but time to waste on a Brightstone corner. But inside his chest, everything was measured, timed, waiting for the gears of the night to click into place. The crow landed silent as soot on his shoulder, its talons pricking faintly through the worn leather of his coat. Its feathers were sleek, midnight against the pallid fog, and its eyes glittered with that strange intelligence Arthur had never quite made peace with. Silas Thorn's bird—always watching, always listening. It shifted its weight and jabbed its beak against his ear. Once. Twice. Thrice. The signal, sharp and undeniable. They were coming.

Arthur didn't move at first. He let the crow settle, let the city breathe around him. Somewhere down the lane a carriage wheel rattled, distant and faint. The lamps buzzed overhead, their filaments flickering against the mist. Only then did he slip a hand into his coat pocket and draw out the sphere. Gold-toned brass, no bigger than a clenched fist, smooth save for the seam that split its shell and the etched sigils Lannic always carved into his work, half for function, half for vanity. Arthur pressed his thumb against the right spot, feeling the mechanism shift beneath the thin metal. With a sharp click, the shell unfolded, legs snapping out like a spider unfurling from its own egg. The machine scuttled down his sleeve and dropped lightly onto the cobbles, vanishing into the fog with a faint clatter of brass on stone. Somewhere out there, its sisters waited, sleeping in gutters and under steps. Now awake, they would find each other, connect, arm themselves. A net of fire and steel woven into the very street.

Arthur couldn't help the ghost of a smile at the design. That was Lannic Morrow's touch all over—finesse where other men would settle for brute force. They used to call him the Toy Maker, back before the war with the Circle turned every one of his "toys" into weapons. Arthur had tinkered with this model, adjusted the legs, improved the timing of the detonators, but the genius was Lannic's. It always was. Arthur had no shame in that. He wasn't here to outshine anyone. He was here to make the damn things work, to put them where they'd matter most. Tonight they'd matter here, on this street, against the Circle's zealots.

The crow shifted again, feathers brushing against his cheek as though reminding him to focus. Arthur lifted his head slightly, eyes narrowing against the fog. And there they were. Three silhouettes emerging from the mist, slow and easy, their boots falling without urgency, their shoulders loose with arrogance. They walked like men who owned the night, who knew no one would dare rise against them in Veylock's shadow. Their voices drifted ahead of them, carried thin on the damp wind—jokes half-laughed, the scrape of a boot against stone, the bark of easy, careless laughter.

Arthur's jaw tightened. No visible weapons—no rifles slung, no blades glinting—but that meant nothing. Men like these carried their violence inside them, ready to be drawn as quick as breath. He knew the look: confident, unafraid, too sure of the fear they cast in others. Emberlash had trained them well in that regard. Fear first, fire second. They would swagger past, collect their coins, remind the city it was theirs to burn. Unless Arthur stopped them. Unless tonight, the balance shifted.

He steadied his breath, feeling the weight of the tools hidden in his coat, the latent hum of the spider-bombs waiting for his signal. The crow dug in its talons once more, and Arthur let the faint sting ground him. This was the moment. The trap was set. The soldiers laughed, and the sound of it cut through the fog like sparks before a blaze.

The Circle soldiers strolled closer, their careless laughter peeling back the fog until Arthur could make out every word. They spoke in the rough-edged cadence of men who'd already had their fun tonight. One bragged about how easily a nose folded beneath his fist, mimicking the crunch with exaggerated glee. Another cackled, spinning the tale wider, turning brutality into sport. Arthur's jaw set as he listened—familiar cruelty, predictable as rust. Then a name cut through the banter. *Jarek.*

Arthur's eyes sharpened. Jarek wasn't just another street-bully with a Circle tattoo hidden under his collar. He was a survivor, one of Emberlash's lieutenants, a man who'd slipped the Cyphers' noose more than once. Twice Arthur had seen his shadow in the aftermath of ambushes gone wrong, the Circle retreating but Jarek walking away untouched. Experience had a way of sharpening men like him into weapons of their own, and it showed.

Because suddenly Jarek stopped. His stride froze mid-step, his boot heel hanging just above the cobbles. His head tilted, eyes narrowing at the quiet street. The laughter from his companions faltered as he raised a hand, commanding silence without a word. His gaze cut left, then right, reading the shadows, sniffing out the quiet tension that Arthur had wrapped around this place. "There's something here…" he muttered, low and dangerous, his voice like steel rasping over stone.

Arthur's stomach knotted, but his body remained still, every muscle trained into patience. He watched as Jarek's hand slid inside his coat, smooth as a practiced ritual, and came back with a pistol, gleaming faintly in the gaslight. The other two followed suit, muttering uneasily, scanning the fog, their eyes flicking to alley mouths and shadowed corners. They were predators, but they'd just realized the street might be hunting them instead.

And then the first trap sang. A sharp pop cracked from the barrels stacked along the wall, followed by the sudden whoosh of coiled tension released. A weighted net flung outward with brutal precision, snapping against the air before wrapping tight around one of the soldiers. He howled, thrashing as the cords bit into his arms and legs, dragging him down in a tangle of steel and rope.

The second didn't have time to laugh at his friend's misfortune before pain ripped through him. A rifle crack split the night, echoing sharp against the stone façades. The man screamed, clutching his leg as red poured between his fingers. He collapsed against the wall, sliding down with a guttural curse, his weapon clattering to the cobbles. Silas's marksmanship—long shot, clean, merciless. The man had always said the crow steadied his eye, but Arthur knew it was Silas's own patience, his hawk's focus, that made the difference.

Arthur stepped out from the shadow of the archway, the cobblestones slick under his boots, his pistol raised and steady. His coat shifted around him like the folds of a drawn curtain, his eyes locked on Jarek. "Be smart, Jarek," Arthur said, his voice low, cold, pragmatic as iron. The gun never wavered. "You know you're caught."

Jarek turned toward him, his face a snarl twisted in fury, teeth bared, the lamplight carving sharp lines into his features. His pistol snapped toward Arthur with the speed of a striking serpent, and his eyes burned with something more dangerous than fear—rage sharpened by survival.

Jarek's pistol barked, the crack of powder tearing through the quiet like a whip. Arthur twisted sideways, the motion sharp, his coat snapping with the turn. The bullet punched into his ribs, but the sting was blunted by the steel plate sewn under his shirt—still enough to knock the air from his lungs, a brutal thud that left him tasting copper. He staggered, his breath caught in his throat, but he did not fall. He knew better than to.

Almost as if the street itself spat back in reply, one of the crawlies perched under a loose stone registered the sound of the gunshot. A sharp metallic chirp, then a concussive roar as it detonated in a blast of shrapnel and light. The explosion flared behind Jarek, shredding brick and air alike, catching him square in the back. He screamed as hot metal ripped across his coat and shoulders, his weapon clattering from his hand, smoke rising in thick curls from the scorched fabric.

The wounded soldier against the wall, blood soaking his leg, roared through clenched teeth and opened fire wildly. Muzzle flashes flared orange against the fog, bullets sparking off cobblestone and iron drainpipes, whining past Arthur's ears close enough to make the hair at his neck prickle.

And then the street answered again. Two Cyphers, hidden in the alleys with rifles braced against old crates, let their shots sing. Muzzles flared, sharp reports splitting the din, their bullets cutting through the haze to answer Circle fire with cold precision. Wood splintered. A brick shattered. The alley became a furnace of noise.

The man tangled in the net writhed and cursed, his hand finally tearing free enough to grip the hilt of a short blade. With a snap of his thumb, the edge ignited red-hot, glowing like a coal freshly pulled from the forge. He slashed at the cords, and they parted with ease, hissing as they melted through. The stink of burning rope filled the air, acrid and heavy, and in seconds he was loose, rolling to his knees with the blade still glowing like hell's own tooth.

Arthur ducked behind a toppled barrel as more shots rang out, splinters biting into his cheek. He pulled a second device from his belt—a dull, palm-sized orb etched with copper veins—and flung it into the open. It cracked against the cobbles, splitting into four tiny legs, and then hissed as it released a choking burst of pale blue smoke. The vapor crawled low, clinging to the street, hissing against the stones as if alive. One of the Circle men stepped into it, coughing hard, and stumbled back with blistered skin where the mist had kissed his hand.

Another mine, hidden in the gutter, clicked sharply as boots struck too close. A metallic shriek, then it snapped open and spat a line of steel caltrops across the cobbles. One soldier screamed as his boot came down, the spikes ripping straight through leather into flesh, dropping him face-first onto the stones. His pistol clattered uselessly away.

The fight descended into chaos, every sound layered over the next: the vicious chatter of gunfire, the hiss of burning rope, the screams of men caught in traps they hadn't seen, the thunder of another Cypher rifle splitting the dark. Sparks lit the fog, gun smoke and acrid chemical mist swirling together until it was impossible to tell fire from shadow.

Arthur moved through it like he was following blueprints only he could see. Ducking, sidestepping, every motion efficient, his pistol steady even as bullets split the air around him. Blood already stained the stones, sharp metallic tang rising with the mist, and still none of them gave quarter. The Circle's zeal met the Cyphers' machines, and in between the street became a grinder, chewing men into screams and smoke.

“Spread out! Don’t bunch up, you fools!” Jarek’s voice tore through the smoke and gunfire, raw and furious, the voice of a man who had bled in alleys before and lived to tell the tale. He was half-crouched, half-limping from the blast he’d taken to his back, but his eyes were feral, teeth bared like a cornered wolf. “Cut these bastards down before they box us in!”

Arthur fired back, the crack of his pistol sharp against the thunder of rifles, ducking as bullets chewed stone just inches from his head. “Hold your ground, Cyphers! Keep the pressure—don’t let them breathe!” His voice cut clear through the haze, measured, commanding, every word delivered with the precision of a man who knew panic was deadlier than bullets. He shoved another round into the chamber with steady fingers, snapping it closed before rolling to new cover.

“Xavier!” Jarek roared from across the street, smoke and flame curling around him as one of his men struck a match against a wall and hurled a bottle of fire-oil into the fog. It burst against the cobbles, orange tongues licking upward, the heat sudden and sharp. “You’ll burn tonight, just like the rest of your filth! Emberlash will see to it your bones glow red before the week’s done!”

Arthur leaned around the edge of a broken crate, eyes narrowing, the firelight reflected sharp in his gaze. “Funny,” he shouted back over the chaos, “I don’t recall Emberlash ever being the one to pull your sorry hide out of my traps. Maybe he doesn’t think you’re worth saving.” He squeezed off two rounds, forcing Jarek to dive behind a stone post, curses spitting from his mouth.

The Circle soldiers began pulling heavier toys into the fray. One lifted a stubby brass tube, twisted a valve, and a burst of liquid fire sprayed across the street, clinging to the wall in thick, sticky sheets that burned blue at the edges. The windows above slammed shut in a panic, wooden shutters clapping like frightened hands. From deeper in the block came the sound of bolts shooting home, locks being drawn, voices hushed into silence. The neighborhood knew better than to linger; Doskvol’s streets had long learned when to watch and when to hide.

In the churn of smoke and screaming metal, one Circle zealot stumbled upon a crawly half-hidden beneath a barrel, its golden legs twitching faintly as it scurried in its mechanical rhythm. “Little bastard vermin—let’s see how *you* like it!” the soldier bellowed, scooping it up in both hands. He hurled it overhead, aiming for the Cyphers’ line, fury thick in his throat.

Arthur’s breath caught in his chest. *No.*

The second the crawly left the cobbles it registered movement, the trigger in its core snapping alive. A sharp metallic shriek, then fire and steel in every direction. The blast ripped through the man’s arms first, shredding his hands to bone and meat in an instant. His scream barely left his throat before the shrapnel caught his face—his jaw torn away, skull caved in by a jagged piece of his own weapon. The body crumpled without ceremony, smoke curling from what was left.

Arthur felt the bile rise in his throat. It hadn’t been the plan—never the plan. Traps were meant to cripple, capture, frighten. Not this. Not *that*. But there was no time to dwell.

The bell tolled. Low, sonorous, impossibly loud, carrying across districts with the weight of inevitability. Once. Twice. Then again. A sound every soul in Doskvol knew too well: death had been claimed, and the Espiritas were already on their way. The sound seemed to echo off the very stone, the street itself trembling under the promise.

“Time’s running!” Arthur barked, his voice sharp as steel. He dove aside as two more bullets whined past, throwing himself behind the blackened shell of a wagon. His shoulder slammed into the wood, the impact rattling down to his bones. He turned—and froze.

There, half-slumped against the wagon's wheel, was Pierre. The boy couldn't have been more than nineteen, his rifle fallen from nerveless fingers, his side soaked crimson where a bullet had chewed through. His face was white as ash, breath hitching in wet rattles.

"Arthur…" His voice broke, panic bubbling up with the blood at his lips. "I—I'm not gonna make it, am I?" His eyes darted wildly, fear raw and unhidden. "Tell me the truth. I don't wanna die here."

Arthur grabbed him by the collar, dragging him upright enough to look him dead in the eyes. "Listen to me," he hissed, voice steady, commanding. "Nobody else dies tonight. Do you hear me? Not you. Not anyone."

Pierre's lip trembled, but he swallowed, nodding, clutching at Arthur's sleeve like it was a lifeline.

"You hold on," Arthur said, voice low now, firm but not unkind. "You breathe. You *breathe*, and you let me handle the rest. You'll see the dawn, boy, I swear it."

The bell tolled again, closer now, its iron voice rolling through the fog. Arthur tightened his grip on his pistol and set his jaw, the clock in his head already counting down. They had minutes. Maybe less. And he would damn well keep that promise.

Arthur pressed his hand harder against Pierre's side, eyes flicking down for a closer inspection despite the storm still raging around them. The wound was ragged, torn wide by the slug that had punched through, blood slicking Pierre's coat and pooling beneath him. Bad. Ugly. But not mortal—not yet. Shock was the killer here, not the bullet. The boy's body shook under Arthur's grip, his pupils wide and glassy, but Arthur's voice came low and firm, forcing calm into the boy's ears. "You're not done, Pierre. You're rattled, but you'll hold. Stay with me." He pulled his hand away, fingers sticky with red, and stood back into the firestorm. There was no more time to spare. This had to end.

Arthur snapped his pistol up and unleashed three shots in quick succession, the recoil biting into his hand as the rounds chewed sparks off the stone arch where the two Circle zealots had taken cover. Their answering fire was immediate, a hail of lead shrieking through the fog. Each shot came with a snarl, with the unholy devotion of men who had already decided their blood meant less than their master's command. Bullets slapped into the cobbles, cracked stone, punched splinters from the wagon Arthur used for cover. The acrid sting of powder clung to the air, thick enough to taste.

"Damn zealots!" Arthur hissed, teeth clenched as he ducked back and thumbed a fresh cartridge into place. These weren't men fighting for survival—they were fighting for spectacle, for devotion, for a grave to be remembered by. That made them all the more dangerous.

The soldier with the shredded leg screamed as he dragged himself closer, propping the rifle against his shoulder despite the blood pouring from him. He loosed a wild volley, each shot deafening at this range, his face twisted in manic fury. Arthur rolled hard, sparks showering his back as a round clipped stone inches from his head. He fired back blind, just enough to force the bastard's aim off, but it wasn't enough. The zealot laughed—laughed through the blood in his teeth—like every second alive was only borrowed time.

Then Jarek barked something sharp and guttural, a command Arthur couldn't hear over the din, and Arthur saw it: the moment Jarek's resolve broke. The veteran's eyes flicked up the street, reading the battle like a ledger, and he knew the sum. He pivoted hard, coat flaring behind him, and bolted into the fog. "Coward!" one of his own men spat, firing another ragged burst even as Jarek's boots hammered into a side alley.

“Silas!” Arthur shouted, voice raw. The reply was a single, precise crack from somewhere high in the dark. A shot whined off the stone, then another, each finding nothing but air and brick. Arthur’s gut twisted as Jarek’s silhouette vanished into the night, swallowed whole by the alleys of Doskvol. Gone.

The fight narrowed to the last zealot, the one with the rifle and the ruined leg. He roared defiance as though he could summon fire itself, spraying lead until the weapon clicked empty. His hand shook as he reached for a pistol at his belt, and Arthur stepped out, raising his revolver one last time. The shot was steady, measured—a craftsman’s strike. The bullet punched into the man’s shoulder, just above the joint. Bone cracked, flesh tore, and the pistol clattered to the cobbles from fingers that no longer obeyed him. He slumped back, groaning, blood spilling freely down his chest, his fury reduced to ragged breath and a glare that could’ve burned holes through steel.

Arthur advanced slowly, boots crunching over broken glass and fallen brass. His pistol remained steady, trained on the zealot’s chest as he lowered himself just enough to meet his eyes. “You’re done,” he said flatly, no triumph in his tone. Only the edge of command.

Behind him, the street was falling silent save for the moans of the wounded. He turned and waved sharply to the others, his voice carrying over the dying echoes of gunfire. “Get Pierre out—now! He’s in shock, careful with him. Keep him upright, keep him breathing. Move!”

Two Cyphers rushed forward, lifting Pierre gently between them, the boy’s head lolling weakly as they dragged him toward the safer shadows. Arthur’s eyes followed them a heartbeat longer, until he saw their silhouettes merge with the fog. Only then did he lower the pistol a fraction.

Silas appeared at his side, crow circling overhead with a harsh cry as if to mark the end of the chaos. His rifle still smoked faintly, his face calm but unreadable in the low light. Arthur jerked his chin toward the wounded prisoner, whose good hand still clawed weakly at the cobbles. “We take him. Alive.”

The bell tolled again, louder now, closer—each note a reminder that time was collapsing around them. Arthur holstered his weapon, stooped low, and hauled the zealot upright with a rough grip. “On your feet,” he growled. “You’ll live long enough to tell me everything I need.”

Together, he and Silas dragged their captive into the mist, boots pounding quick and heavy against the stone. Behind them, shutters remained tight, windows dark, and the bell’s iron song rolled across Doskvol. The Espiritas were coming, fast and merciless. Arthur didn’t look back. They had minutes—no more—and he intended to use every second.

The canal stank of old tides and iron rot, a low, greasy smell that clung to the back of Arthur’s throat as stubbornly as smoke. Fog hung in a sheet over the black water, muffling distant bells and turning the gaslights along the quay into yellow coins pressed flat against the night. Brick sweated. Ropes creaked on moored barges. Somewhere under the arch of a narrow bridge, rats dimpled the surface in nervous circles. They’d chosen a gap between warehouses where the street fell away to a narrow towpath—just wide enough for three men and one bleeding fool to keep their business out of sight. Tobby lay on his side with his wrists bound behind him in tar-stiff rope, coat clotted to his shoulder where the bullet had chewed through, breath hitching in short, angry pulls. Silas stood a pace back, shadow tall and still against the wet stone, while his black crow worked the prisoner the way a locksmith worries a stuck pin: patient, precise, cruel. The bird’s slick beak tapped and tore at the edge of the wound in tiny, obscene bites, and each time it pecked Tobby spasmed and hissed a curse between his teeth,

the sound half pain, half pride. Arthur let it go on long enough to scrape the bravado thin, then crouched, tired voice sanding itself flat. “Look, Tobby, was it? That what you told me?”

“Yeah,” he panted, turning his head enough to spit red onto Arthur’s boot, the gob steaming in the chill. “Tobby.” He tried to smile and winced when the crow nipped again. “You write it down for your report, scum?”

“I’m not writing anything,” Arthur said, ignoring the spit and the sting of the word. He angled his body so the lamp-glow caught his face and not the bird, let the kid see the eyes and the hands, not the tools. “I’m trying to make sure you don’t die on the stones for a man who ran. Your friend back there blew his own hand off because he grabbed something he didn’t understand. Jarek left you to bleed. That’s what you’re loyal to?” He lifted two fingers and Silas’s crow hopped back, leaving the wound to weep. The sudden absence of pain made its own argument. “Talk to me and I keep him off you. Keep enough blood in you to see daylight. Fair trade.”

Tobby barked a laugh that came out as a ragged cough. “Daylight? He had to go tell our superiors. That was his task. More important than three of us and your little club. You wouldn’t understand—” the crow pecked; he sucked air and swallowed the end of the sentence with a groan—“you don’t have anything worth dying for.”

Arthur let the lie hang in the fog and didn’t touch it. “What I understand is leverage,” he said, tone conversational, as if they were sharing a smoke instead of a bleed-out. “Your shoulder’s torn, but not through-and-through. I’ve got a pressure bandage and a vial that’ll slow the bleeding without knocking you cold. I’ve got a friend” —he tipped his chin at Silas without looking— “who can call his bird off or tell it to go deeper. I’ve also got a bag with enough wire to tie a man to a mooring post and leave him to the Espiritas. They don’t come gentle when there’s fresh death in the air. They’ll cut your soul before it even knows it’s loose. You know that sound their masks make when they breathe? Like a bellows inside a coffin.” He let that settle, then softened the edge. “Or I can put you in a cart, drop you at a back door in Nightmarket where they patch men who made bad bets. You’re young. You’ve got time to decide what your loyalty’s worth. All I want is clarity.”

Silas twitched a fingertip. The crow shuffled one glossy foot on Tobby’s ribs and leaned, staring with that hard, wet bead of an eye, as if daring him to be brave. Tobby clenched his jaw and breathed through it, sweat crawling cold along his hairline. “You’ll do what you want,” he said hoarsely. “Men like you always do. You think we’re mindless. We’re not. We choose the fire.” He twisted his head to look past Arthur toward the black canal. “We choose it because it’s clean.”

“Is that what they told you?” Arthur asked, and for a heartbeat the bitterness bled through his calm. He took it back in the next breath. “Clean is a word men use when they haven’t had to wash after. Tobby—listen. I don’t care about your sermons. I care about one piece of metal I pulled apart on a bench and what it was meant to do. We found your egg. We know it disperses. Channels cut for outward spray, not a cone. I want to know how many, where they’re going, who signs off. You give me a shape, I give you a night you survive.”

Tobby’s lip curled. “Emberlash signs—” the crow’s beak flicked like a needle; his body arched and fell—“Emberlash signs off on all of it.”

“Emberlash doesn’t order machining tolerances to half a hair or specify casing alloys,” Arthur said, patient as a metronome. He took a clean rag from his pocket, folded it once, set it lightly against the edge of the wound without pressure, then lifted it away so Tobby could feel what he was not yet given. The scent of iron rose, warm and copper-sour. “Someone sent you the pattern. Someone with an idea that wasn’t arson in a bottle. This isn’t terror for a crowd. This is control. How many units?”

Silas didn’t speak, but the air around him tightened. Another tiny click of the tongue and the crow hopped, found a new edge of torn flesh, and worried it. Tobby yelped, wordless, the sound bouncing off brick and water, then bit it down hard enough his molars creaked. He squeezed his eyes shut and shook his head. “Go to hell.”

“We’re already there,” Arthur said, and the truth of it flattened any drama in the line. He looked over Tobby’s shoulder at the slow pull of the canal, the scum line glowing dull under lamplight, then back at the boy. “Last offer: I wrap you, I haul you to a door I trust, I tell the Sisters their soup’ll be lighter if you’re not a ghost by morning. You tell me what I need and you forget my face. Or you keep playing soldier, and when you pass out, he—” the crow tapped once, a soft wet sound— “keeps you awake until you wish you hadn’t.”

Silas’s shadow leaned a fraction closer. The crow cocked its head, the lantern-gold making a glassy coin of its eye, then pecked twice in quick succession. Tobby hissed, then laughed, a small broken sound that had more fear than mirth in it. “You want numbers?” he muttered. “You want names?” He rolled his head toward Arthur and tried for contempt; it landed somewhere near exhaustion. “We don’t get either. We get crates. We get marks. We get told where to bring them and when to keep our hands off. We get told to shut up and smile like we understand.”

“Then tell me what you do understand,” Arthur said. He kept his hands visible, empty, the offer of the bandage hovering between them like a truce flag. “What’s different this time.”

Tobby swallowed, throat working, eyes shining wet in the lamplight. He held out as long as pride could hold a body together, then the seam split. “It’s… it’s a prototype,” he said, spitting the word like something spoiled. “Not for us. Not one of our burns. They said it uses our dispersion—” his fingers twitched against the rope as if remembering the curve of the steel—“but the intent isn’t ours. We light streets. We send a message. This—this was… meant to be placed. Fixed. Like a lantern you don’t move. Someone else ordered it. Not Emberlash.” He blinked, breath stuttering. “We weren’t supposed to ask who.”

Arthur didn’t breathe for a count of three. The fog ticked on his lashes, the canal lapped at stone, and behind all of it the city’s low current hummed, a line on a gauge nudging toward red. He eased the bandage into place at last and pressed, firm and clean, and the crow stepped back at a soundless command from Silas, leaving the kid to shiver in the cold relief. “Good,” Arthur said quietly, and in the word there was no triumph—only the cool click of a piece sliding into a larger machine. “That’s the clarity I needed.”

Tobby’s breath hitched, slowed, eyelids dragging down like shutters in a windless room, and for a heartbeat Arthur thought the boy was finally sagging into the dull mercy of shock. He slid the metal latch on his compact kit with his teeth, worked one-handed to draw out a folded gauze and a vial, and leaned in with the same automatic care he would give a leaking valve—thumb here, pressure there, stop the loss and buy a little time. The smell was iron and canal rot and old rope; the fog beaded on his lashes; the crow watched with a glossy, patient eye. As Arthur’s gloved hand traced the edge of torn flesh to set the pad, the boy came alive the way wounded animals do—no warning, just teeth. Pain detonated up Arthur’s wrist as Tobby clamped down hard through leather, a hot, ragged bite that turned his breath into a hissed oath and his vision white at the edges. Instinct did the math before thought: free hand, shortest path, make it stop. His fist cracked across Tobby’s face with the flat, ugly sound of knuckles striking cartilage; the nose went under his knuckles like wet plaster; the boy’s head snapped back; rope and momentum rolled him once. There was a smear of blood and spit on Arthur’s glove and then the weight was gone, flipping over the lip of the quay. “Rot in the—” Tobby spat, the rest of the curse lost as the canal took him with a slap and a hollow gulp. The black water surged and closed. For a breath there was only churn and bubbles and a brief, treading thrash that had no leverage with his wrists bound; then the surface went slick and quiet again, save for the soft bump of a

floating plank against stone. Arthur stared into the ripple until it became just another wrinkled darkness among a thousand others, the sting in his palm throbbing in time with the slow tick of a moored barge's hull against its post. He flexed his bitten hand once, twice, watched fresh blood thread along the seam in his glove and patter to the stones, and let the pain file the edge off any sentiment trying to lift its head.

Silas didn't move. The crow shifted to Arthur's shoulder with a whisper of claws on leather and tilted its head toward the water as if to ask whether there would be more. "He was going to drown the minute we turned our backs," Silas said at last, voice low and even, as if commenting on weather. "You just moved the tide up a minute."

Arthur nodded once. The canal's breath came cool against his bitten skin, made the ache clean. "He made his calculation," he said, and it wasn't cruelty; it was a ledger entry. He wiped his glove on the edge of the quay, smearing blood into old algae, then snapped the first-aid kit shut and tucked it away. The fog carried a faint bell from somewhere upriver and the barest salt of the sea. "But he gave us what we needed before he went under." He kept his eyes on the slack water while he laid the pieces in order so they couldn't slide out of place later. "The egg isn't theirs in intent. Dispersion's Circle work, but the pattern isn't Emberlash's. Fixed placement, not a street burn. Someone else commissioned it. Someone with reach enough to get their hands inside the Circle and not lose them." He glanced at Silas, the other man's face cut to planes by the jaundiced lamplight, rain beading on the brim of his hat. "Which means our fire isn't just fire. It's an instrument. And instruments have composers."

Silas's mouth thinned. "Elias Wren's name's been floating more than it should," he said, eyes unreadable under the shadow. "Antiquities dealer doesn't order casing tolerances either. But he knows who does. He touches coin before it touches hands."

"Agree," Arthur said, jaw setting around the word. He felt the plan begin to articulate in his head like a mechanism seating teeth. "We pull on Wren. We check the forges that can handle that alloy and channeling cut. We find orders that don't match the Circle's usual runs. And we ask why a zealot king is taking contracts." He flexed his bitten hand again, the sting sharpening his focus, and turned from the canal, drawing the fog back into his lungs like a steadying draught. "Emberlash's the flame, but someone else set the lamp. We find out who—and why they want a city ringed in eggs." The crow clicked once, as if punctuating the thought, and the two men slipped off the towpath into the thinning night, leaving the canal to keep what it had taken.

Arthur's chalk dragged with a dry squeal across the slate, leaving behind the rough curve of another sketch—an ovoid shape, smudged by the side of his hand where he'd leaned too long on the board. The surface of the thing was plain enough in outline, but his lines fractured at the edges into smaller vents, crosshatched like teeth. He stepped back, rubbing the heel of his palm against tired eyes, and stared at it the way a man stares at an unfinished equation. The table behind him was littered with parts he'd pried from the Circle's scraps the night before: warped bits of casing, a broken ignition coil, residue scorched black into the seams. All of it smelled faintly of char and oil, as if the metal itself remembered burning. In his notes, he'd written "FIRE?" once, then crossed it out and replaced it with "GAS?" then scratched that down to "DISPERSION?" The truth was, he didn't know. And not knowing made his chest feel tighter than the underground air.

The heavy creak of hinges pulled his attention from the board. He didn't need to look to know who it was; only one man in Doskvol walked into his space without asking. The scent of singed leather came with him, always did. "Morning, Arthur," Lannic's voice carried the faint rasp of someone who'd smoked too much and shouted more. His boots clicked against the stone,

deliberate, steady, until the bulk of him filled the doorway and then the room itself. He didn't bother shutting the door.

Arthur glanced back, one brow rising. "You ever heard of knocking?" His voice was flat, but not unkind. He wiped his chalked fingers on his trousers, leaving pale streaks over soot already worked into the fabric.

"Not for you," Lannic said, stepping further inside, the lines of his tailored coat catching the low lamplight. The scars across his skull caught it too, pale and ridged where fire had taken him years ago, making half his face look like it had been carved with a dull blade. His good eye sharpened on the sketch, then flicked back to Arthur with a knowing weight. "How's the work?"

Arthur let out a sound—half a laugh, half a sigh—as he turned back to the board. "Progress," he muttered, though his tone made the word feel like a curse. He tapped the chalk against the egg's outline, the clink echoing in the cramped stone walls. "Ambush paid off. We got confirmation the Circle's playing with dispersal tech, only… it's not theirs. At least, not in design. Our friend didn't say much before he… drowned himself." He paused, eyes narrowing at the memory, before continuing. "But he slipped. Said it was ordered. Prototype. Emberlash isn't building for his zealots anymore. He's building for someone else."

Lannic moved closer, the faint whirr of his mechanical finger audible as he flexed it against his palm. He stopped just behind Arthur, close enough that his shadow swallowed the chalked weapon. "You're certain?"

Arthur exhaled through his nose. "As certain as I can be. And if that's the case, then this—" He rapped the chalk again against the egg's side, leaving a pale chip. "—isn't a toy for back alleys. It's a message. Or worse, a strategy." He set the chalk down, leaned his palms on the table, and looked over the scattered parts like they might rearrange themselves into answers if he stared long enough.

For a moment, the underground workshop hummed with nothing but the sound of distant gears in the Emporium's belly, the steady drip of condensation against stone, and Arthur's own steady breathing. When he finally spoke again, his voice was quieter, low and tight with something he kept carefully masked. "Out there, if these things get seeded in the streets… it's not just gangs tearing at each other anymore. It's families choking in their homes. Children running with their clothes on fire. Crowded trams turned into ovens." He straightened, jaw clenching as he reached for a rag to clean the chalk from his hands. "We've seen the Circle make their point before, but this isn't a spectacle. This is efficiency. Whoever's bankrolling it doesn't want fire for worship. They want fire for control."

Lannic studied him a long while in silence, the ruined half of his face unreadable, the other eye sharp as a knife. "And that worries you," he said at last, not quite a question.

Arthur met his gaze, his own expression as steady and pragmatic as always, though the set of his mouth was tighter than usual. "It should worry anyone who still cares what Doskvol looks like when the smoke clears."

Lannic didn't answer right away. He lingered by the table instead, the mechanical finger on his right hand ticking faintly against the scarred wood like a metronome, his gaze still on the sketch of the weapon. But when he finally reached into the inner pocket of his coat, the motion was slow, deliberate, and the weight in his expression made Arthur's stomach turn before the paper even left the man's hand. Lannic unfolded it without a word, smoothed the creases with his scarred palm, and laid it flat across the clutter of parts and notes. The ink was smudged where the press had run too damp, but the headline still cut clean as a knife. **HORROR RETURNS TO**

DOSKVOL: Merrow Valesque ESCAPES Ironscar. The article wasted no time with subtleties. The name itself was wrapped in blood and dread.

Merrow Valesque, the infamous anarchist and orchestrator of several mass civilian incidents, has reportedly escaped from Ironscar Keep late last night. Known for his calculated chaos and theatrical violence, Valesque was arrested two years ago after a city-wide crackdown spearheaded by the Espiritas Police and the Imperial Police. Officials described him as unstable, manipulative, and capable of inflicting 'symbolic terror' that struck not just the flesh, but the very identity of Doskvol's people. He was believed to be in solitary confinement under death row supervision at Ironscar's highest-security wing… until now.

Arthur's eyes fixed on the name, and for a moment, the hum of the emporium's hidden gears seemed to fade, leaving only the pounding of his own heart. The rest of the article sprawled across the page, dense columns that dripped menace with every line: infamous anarchist, mass civilian incidents, calculated chaos, theatrical violence. Arrested two years ago in the grand sweep. Condemned to solitary, death row waiting. And now—gone. Out. Loose again in a city still limping from the last time he'd set it alight.

He read the words twice over without meaning to, each one lodging like grit in his teeth. He finally tore his gaze away to Lannic, who stood silent, the ruined side of his face locked tight, unreadable. Arthur's voice came low, strained. "When?"

"Late last night," Lannic said, and the gravel in his voice was sharper than usual. "While you were out in Brightstone. Circle wasn't the only fire in this city."

Arthur leaned back from the table, rag still in his hands, knuckles white where he gripped it. "I thought—" He broke off, jaw clenched, then tried again. "I thought we were done with him. That part of the city was finished."

"Everyone did." Lannic's gaze hardened, his good eye narrowing as if the words themselves carried weight enough to crush. "Espiritas swore he was locked tighter than the Emperor's vault. No one knows how. Not yet. But you'll hear stories soon enough. And none of them will make sense."

Arthur dragged a hand down his beard, the scratch of stubble grounding him only slightly. His thoughts spiraled, the chaos of the night's ambush suddenly pale compared to the flood now rushing through his mind. Merrow Valesque—back in the streets, back in the alleys, back in the marrow of Doskvol. He had seen firsthand what the man's "performances" left behind: bodies arranged like theater sets, buildings gutted to ash not for strategy but for spectacle. Chaos not as byproduct but as doctrine. And now all of that unshackled, free to crawl again through the city's veins.

"Careful out there, Arthur," Lannic said after a long silence, softer now, though the words were heavy as stone. "Whatever else we're building, whatever war we're fighting with the Circle—don't forget there's a wolf loose again. And he doesn't just hunt rivals. He hunts symbols. He hunts families. He hunts whatever makes this city think it's still human."

Arthur didn't answer. His throat was dry, his mind too full of images he couldn't stop: faces in the firelight, screams under collapsing roofs, the echoes of laughter in a burning street. He stared down at the headline until the letters blurred into nothing but black shapes, and still the name burned clearer than anything else. Isadora. The sound of it was enough to knot his gut. He hadn't spoken it aloud in months, hadn't dared let it slip past his lips in the wrong company. But now it was all he could think. And with Merrow walking free again, Doskvol had become a tinderbox—and Arthur could already feel the spark drifting closer.

Chapter 2: **Echoes of a Whisper**

Doskvol is different when you arrive by water—she greets you nose-first: brine, tar, spilled lamp oil, and the peppery tang of smoked eel curling under the fog like a secret handshake. The gulls don't cry so much as heckle, and the canal whistles gossip to the docks long before the foot traffic does. Everyone says this city is made of brick and iron, but from where I sit it's stitched with rope and fish-scale and the frayed twine of promises paid in coin you can smell. Territory here isn't drawn only with knives and sigils but with the color of the nets hung to dry, with which gang's boys unload which crates at dawn, with whose watch-lanterns burn steady when the wind cuts mean. And if you squint—past the soot, past the priest's sermons painted on the walls—it almost looks like hope has a stall at the market too, haggling loud between barrels of pickled something and a woman selling lucky shell charms for a price that says she knows exactly how unlucky most of us are.

I take all this in from a booth that's been dented by more elbows than I care to count, a corner seat that shows me the door, the mirror behind the bottles, and the quick shuffle of hands I'm pretending not to see at the dice table. My drink is a cheap amber that smells like burned sugar and old wood, and I cradle it like it might talk back if I'm patient. Patience is a habit, not a virtue—good to have when you're an independent investigator who answers to her own ledger and her own nerves. Freedom is the job's true retainer, if I'm honest, though the coin helps. People pay well when you find what they've lost or prove what they're afraid to admit.

Here in Doskvol, "lost" often wears a mask. Tonight mine wears the name Olly, a ritual man with a taste for circles and knives and the kind of gatherings that make the air feel thinner afterward. I picked up his trail in the Imperial City—paper threads, hushed warnings, a temple that swore it had never heard of him twice—and the whisper that finally hooked me said he'd been seen up here, brushing shoulders with a merchant out of Brightstone. Someone clever with gears and curios and the right kind of secrets to buy with a smile. Elias Wren, they called him in three different bars and one sober ledger, a shopkeeper with the posture of a man who keeps one hand in the till and the other in the past. I don't chase rumors for sport, but this one has a temperature that matches the burns Olly leaves behind, and Doskvol, for all her soot and swagger, has a way of letting the right names find each other.

The room around me is a small theater: the waitress with the chipped tooth who double-knots her apron like a talisman, the dockhand whose left boot squeaks and whose right eye watches two tables at once, the scholar pretending his ink-stained fingers don't shake when the door opens. I catalog them the way I catalog a crime scene, which is to say with empathy before judgment—people tell you more when you let them keep their dignity. I take a sip, make a face (too sweet), set the glass down and almost knock it over with my sleeve because grace and I are on speaking terms but not friendly ones. I smile at myself because the trick is to look like you belong even when your coat is three cities old and your heart is somewhere you haven't found yet.

I don't say certain words in rooms like this—the ones that taste like lullabies or like a small hand I swear I could still fit in mine. Doskvol is a city where missing things wash up, eventually, if you know where to stand and what the tide brings. So I stand, in my way, from a booth with a dented cushion and a view of the mirror, and count my leads: Olly, who shouldn't be anywhere and yet keeps stepping out of corners; the rumor of the "terror of Doskvol" folded into old prayers and worse headlines; and Elias Wren, whose name sits in my mouth like a coin I might bite to check.

I like freedom, yes, and I like getting paid, but what I like best is understanding—why bad things happen, who lit the match, where the smoke is thickest and why the wind blows that way. Outside, a tram bell rings and someone laughs too loudly at nothing. Inside, I finish the drink I don't like, tuck my notes beneath my palm, and decide that tomorrow the pawnshop with the

tasteful lies in the window gets my morning. If Olly is only an echo, Elias is the wall it's bouncing off, and I've always been good at following a sound until it tells me its name.

Syloki sat deep in the booth's velvet shadow, her back to the wall where no eyes could sneak up behind her, her boots stretched beneath the table and her fingers curled loosely around the last of her drink. The glass was smudged, condensation pooling at its base, and she rolled it idly between her palms as though it might whisper answers if she listened closely enough. Her cloak hung heavy about her shoulders, the deep wine-red fabric swallowing the candlelight into folds of darkness, while the faintest shimmer of pale energy hummed at her fingertips, an unconscious tell when her mind wandered too far. Her hair framed her face in dark waves, stubborn strands falling across her brow, and her eyes, sharp with curiosity yet softened by something almost tender, drifted between the stage of the Lounge and the notes scattered across her table.

The Twilight Lounge pulsed with muted life around her, smoke curling from low pipes, a piano humming soft and low against the shuffle of hushed voices. Laughter flared and died as quickly as a struck match in a back alcove, a deal made, a secret shared, a threat tucked neatly away. But Syloki wasn't watching them only to see; she was cataloging, weighing, learning the rhythm of how Doskvol breathed when it thought no one was listening. She wrote the shape of the city in her mind with the same patience she used to ink a name into her notes. The parchment before her was a patchwork of trails she had stitched together—fragments of whispers about Olly, cult circles left unfinished, sacrifices half-remembered, a trail of rot she had been following from the Imperial City north to this den of soot and shadow.

She reached for the newspaper folded across the corner of the table, the *Blades Chronicle*, the ink still smudging at her fingertips. The headline sprawled across the page like a wound: HORROR RETURNS TO DOSKVOL: Merrow Valesque ESCAPES Ironscar**.** Her lips pressed thin as she read it again, the name carrying weight even here, in a city already bruised by its own monsters. The article spoke of terror, of chaos made flesh, of a man turned myth through fire and blood. She let her eyes linger only a moment longer before folding it closed again, pushing it away from her like a plate gone cold. She had no interest in chasing nightmares she couldn't catch—not when Olly's name still rang in her ears, not when the only thread she had left to pull on was tied to this merchant, Elias Wren.

Her notes circled his name three times, underlined with the pressure of determination. A pawnshop in Brightstone, whispers of strange trinkets traded for more than coin, a man with a mind tuned to the peculiar frequency of invention. If Olly had been seen with him, then Elias was the wall her quarry had leaned against, the shadow cast by his last step. Syloki's pulse quickened with the promise of direction, her drink forgotten now as she leaned back into the booth, watching the door with a restless patience that had always been her curse. Somewhere in this city of knives and smoke, the two names—Olly and Elias—touched. She would find where.

She drummed her fingers lightly against the table, the faint glow at her hands dimming as she forced her mind back to the present. For now, she would wait. For Elias Wren to arrive, for a lead to step through the door of the Twilight Lounge as easily as another weary patron seeking refuge in its shadows. The night was still young, and Doskvol was a city that never starved her hunters.

Indeed, she didn't have to wait long, for her sources were right. This was his place of choice for his late drinking. The noise of the door opening pulled her attention as the cold night air pushed in a draft of fog. Elias Wren, exactly as he had been described to her, stepped into the lounge with the slow swagger of a man who believed himself untouchable. His form was wiry and lean, his frame swallowed in a long coat that hung loose over his narrow shoulders, the fabric

patched with odd bits of stitching like a garment repurposed too many times but never allowed to die. His skin was pale, almost sallow in the light, as though the sun had never once touched him, and his dark hair was slicked back in an oily sheen that made his high forehead look larger than it was. His features were sharp and narrow, a long nose and pinched mouth that curled with something always between a smirk and a sneer. His eyes, small and restless, darted about the room before he even moved toward the bar, scanning for danger—or profit—like a rat sniffing the edges of a trap.

Trailing him were two brutes, their heavy boots loud against the wooden floorboards. Their shoulders were broad enough to clear a path through the crowd without a word spoken, their expressions blank and dumb, but their hands never far from the coats that surely hid the weight of iron beneath. It was said Elias was never seen without such men, and now Syloki could see why. The man walked with the arrogance of safety, each step cushioned by the presence of violence at his back. Some called him paranoid, others called him shrewd, but no one doubted he was as shady as the alleys of Silkshore themselves.

Syloki's gaze followed him as he drifted to the bar, lifting two fingers lazily to summon his first drink. The bartender filled his glass with no hesitation, sliding it across the counter as if he had done it a hundred times before, and Elias took it with a practiced flourish. He drank quickly, one glass down, then ordered another, his laughter bubbling up too loudly as he exchanged a few pleasantries with one of his guards. Syloki stayed tucked in her corner, her drink held casually in one hand, her face relaxed and unreadable. Blending into the background was second nature to her—she had learned long ago how to disappear without moving an inch, how to become furniture, wallpaper, the kind of presence that never drew a glance. From her booth, her eyes missed nothing.

It wasn't long before another man arrived. He moved without hesitation to Elias, sliding onto the stool beside him with the familiarity of someone expected. Their heads bent toward each other, voices low, but not low enough for Syloki. Her eyes tracked the shape of their mouths, every word painted in subtle motion, her talent for reading lips sharpening the exchange into perfect clarity.

"It looked like Cypher tech to me," the stranger said at one point, his lips curling around the words with certainty.

Elias barked a laugh, louder than the lounge was meant to hold, a sharp sound that drew more eyes than it should have. "Cypher tech?? I don't build toys, my friend. I build technology of the finest model. I thought it was what you hired, no?"

The other man scowled, raising his glass in a slow, irritated motion before drinking deeply. "It was what I wanted, yes. Though I hardly call it finest when it broke so easily."

Elias waved him off with a flick of his long fingers, his mouth twisting again into that rat's smirk. "Then go to my competitors. I doubt you'll find better prices, you fool."

Their voices sank back into rushed, heated tones, the words harder to catch, their conversation meandering into strange and winding places—names Syloki didn't recognize, half-coded references that seemed to circle back again and again to something heavier than mere commerce. And still she sat, steady as stone, observing it all from a distance, her eyes cataloging every flicker of Elias's lips, every twitch of the man beside him, storing away each phrase like threads she would weave later into the larger tapestry of her investigation.

At one point, Elias, his two henchmen, and his company all got up, chairs scraping back against the floorboards, their movements abrupt and decisive. They were leaving, and the subtle shift in their posture told Syloki this was no casual drift to another table—it was departure. So,

discreetly, she did the same, sliding from her booth with the quiet grace of someone who had made an art of invisibility. She kept her distance, just far enough behind them to tail without being noticed, her steps softened by the low murmur of Silkshore's night.

The group meandered through the streets, weaving in and out of lamplight, their laughter and muttered exchanges carried back to her on the damp wind. She kept to the edges, moving when they moved, freezing when they paused, her heart keeping rhythm with the clop of their boots on cobblestone. Eventually, they stopped before a small pawn shop nestled among the cluttered, crooked storefronts of Silkshore. The sign above the door was unfamiliar, and Syloki's brow furrowed. Something was wrong. Her notes, painstakingly gathered from whispers and fragments, had pointed to Elias Wren being tied to another place entirely—a shop across town called *Wren's Wonders.* But this was not it.

She lingered in the shadows across the street, watching with narrowed eyes as Elias and his company disappeared inside. The door closed behind them with the dull thud of a secret sealing itself away. She waited. And waited. Lamps burned low, the night pressed on, and the streets began to thin of foot traffic, but Elias did not reappear. Slowly, like water filling a vessel, the realization settled over her: she had lost him. The frustration cut deep, twisting in her chest like a knife. He was in there, behind those walls, and she was on the outside with nothing but her patience gnawing at her resolve.

Finally, she made her choice. She crossed the street with the casual air of someone with no greater intent than passing curiosity. Pushing the door open, she stepped inside, her eyes adjusting quickly to the dim interior. It was a small shop, the smell of dust and old wood heavy in the air, and shelves stacked haphazardly with oddments and forgotten trinkets.

A man with messy hair and a tired, unshaven face straightened from behind the counter as the bell above the door chimed. His smile was practiced, but his eyes sharp, following her every move with the wariness of someone who weighed each stranger for threat. "Welcome," he said, voice light but edged. "I'm Alaric. Anything I can help you find tonight?"

Syloki let her lips curve into a polite, disarming smile, shaking her head just slightly. "Just browsing," she said, her tone soft, casual, betraying none of the calculations behind her eyes. She drifted further in, letting her gaze wander over shelves of clocks, tools, odd scraps of machinery, and jewelry dulled with age. But her attention, in spite of herself, lingered on the door behind him. It was plain, tucked into the back wall, yet it drew her like gravity. She stared too long—she realized it only when she looked back to see his eyes fixed firmly on her, suspicion tightening his features.

Did he notice? Had she given herself away? Syloki tilted her head slightly, pretending to admire a tarnished brass trinket on the shelf beside her, but the question gnawed. His eyes had not left her once.

She kept wandering the shelves, fingers brushing against brass gears, chipped porcelain, and clockwork parts, pretending to search for something only she knew the shape of. Every movement was measured, every pause a feint, her eyes sliding back to that door at the far end of the shop. It pulled at her instincts like a lodestone—her gut told her whatever Elias Wren was doing here, whatever reason he'd vanished inside, the answers lay behind that door. But Alaric's gaze was sharp, and no matter how he shifted or pretended to busy himself, he never strayed far from that threshold. Always there, always guarding.

The bell above the entrance gave a faint chime as another customer entered, a young woman with tired eyes and a scarf pulled high against the Silkshore chill. Syloki seized the moment, keeping her eyes low as Alaric turned his attention to the newcomer. He didn't move far, but he stepped just enough toward the counter to ask what the woman wanted. Syloki stole a glance at

the door again, her mind whirring through possibilities. How to draw him away? How to slip through without shattering her cover?

She was still turning options in her head when it happened. A voice, sudden and close—too close—cut through the quiet. “What you really looking for in here, miss?”

The words brushed her ear with enough intimacy to jolt her spine. She gasped, startled, and the little trinket she’d been holding slipped from her hands, falling to the floor with a sharp, brittle crack. Shards scattered across the wood like ice splintering on stone.

Alaric loomed just behind her, his shadow long, his eyes colder than the smile he wore. He didn’t even glance at the broken piece. His voice was flat, absolute. “You are going to pay for that.”

Syloki whirled on him, masking her racing pulse with the indignation of a customer scorned. “What the fuck, old man? I’m looking for something, I’m a paying customer!” Her voice rose just enough to carry through the quiet shop, sharp with heat. “And I’m not paying for that—it was your fault I dropped it.”

They stared at each other, silence heavy, the air between them stretched tight as wire. His hand moved first. Rough fingers seized her arm, clamping down with an iron grip that belied his disheveled appearance. His face came closer, his breath sharp with smoke. “I don’t take kindly to intruders,” he said, his tone low, lethal. “You’re no customer here, surely. I can tell.”

Her mind scrambled, a story already forming. She needed something plausible, something simple. “Look,” she said quickly, forcing a note of weary honesty into her voice. “I’m just looking for a snow globe. One of those that never stops raining, lightly enchanted—you know the sort? I saw one once at Wren’s Wonders, but it was too expensive for me. Do you have one?” She held his gaze, praying her lie would cling, that it would explain her presence, her wandering eyes.

But Alaric’s expression never softened. If anything, the suspicion in his sharp features cut deeper. His grip tightened, pulling her toward the front door. “Let’s go, miss,” he said, voice final.

Syloki twisted against him, her boots scuffing the floor. “Unhand me, you brute!” she snapped, her tone outraged, every inch of her body straining to push him aside, to shake free from his hold before he dragged her outside.

Syloki struggled against Alaric with all her strength, twisting her arm and shoving him back with a sudden burst of force. His body slammed against one of the tall wooden shelves that lined the cramped shop, the impact rattling the entire structure until jars, trinkets, and boxes shook loose and clattered against one another. A thin glass vial toppled from the upper ledge, spinning once before it hit the floor. The sound was sharp, crystalline, and the moment it shattered the entire shop was swallowed in unnatural dark. It wasn’t the absence of lamplight alone—it was heavier, thicker, a shadow that smothered even the faint glow of the street through the windows. Syloki’s breath caught in her throat, her heartbeat suddenly louder than the world itself. Somewhere ahead, she heard Alaric curse low and bitter, the words grinding between his teeth. “Fucking Veil,” he spat, the sound of a man who knew exactly what kind of mistake had been made.

She wasted no time. Syloki tore herself free from his grip in the confusion, stumbling through the ink-thick black, her hands scraping along the edges of shelves as she darted forward. The darkness felt alive, pressing close against her face, choking out space until she couldn’t tell where the room ended and she began. Then she noticed it—something acrid and metallic in the air, a stench that clung to the back of her throat. Her nostrils flared. Something had broken with that vial, something more than just glass, and its fumes crawled into her lungs with every desperate breath.

Alaric's voice cut through the dark, closer now than she wanted it to be, cruel and raw. "You whore—" he hissed, his tone like a blade slashing through the black. "You better get away before the lights return. Doskvol shadows are unforgiving." The words rolled out like a curse, and though they dripped with venom, Syloki caught a strange undertone—something almost like warning buried in the hate. She didn't stop to wonder why. Her palms slid against splintered wood, finding the frame of something, but not the right something. She turned, stumbling, her boots skidding against the uneven planks, her fingers snatching for anything that felt like freedom.

She didn't care anymore whether it was the back door, the side door, or the one she had walked through to begin with. She only knew she had to get out, had to put the choking dark and Alaric's voice behind her before the Veil of shadow lifted and he had her in his grip again. Her pulse thundered in her ears as she moved blindly, guided by nothing but instinct and the faintest draft of cold air brushing against her cheek. And then, at last, her fingers touched a seam in the dark—a handle, iron and cold as the city's heart. She pulled, forcing the door wide, and the air beyond rushed in like salvation.

When she stumbled into the street, gaslight and fog washing over her like a tide, she kept running until her legs burned, until the twisted knot of fear in her stomach eased enough for thought to return. Only then did she slow, breathless and trembling, the memory of Alaric's snarl still sharp in her ears. Her escape was victory, yes, but bitter at its edges. It wasn't cleverness that had saved her, only chance, and that stung. She pressed her back against the slick brick of an alley wall, her chest heaving as she replayed every moment. She would have to reassess, to change her approach. Doskvol was not a city that forgave mistakes, and tonight had nearly cost her more than pride.

Realising this, Syloki's thoughts turned inward. She needed to be smarter, sharper, and above all—less alone. This city was a tangle of knives, and she would not survive it by running blind into every shadow. She would need to rebuild her network, find allies in the undercurrent, and hone her skills in ways she had once taken for granted. Her clumsiness would get her killed here. Her optimism, misplaced, would be eaten alive. Doskvol demanded more, and if she was to uncover what brought Elias Wren, Olly, and her missing threads together, she would have to give the city what it wanted: resolve forged in its own dark fire.

Syloki walked through the streets, blending in with everyone else again, her shoulders loosened into the city's rhythm the way a coin disappears into a pocket—no ripple, no mark, only the slight shift of weight she felt and no one else noticed. Disappearing into the background had always been her favorite trick; Doskvol rewarded the invisible far more than it did the brave, and tonight had underlined that lesson in bruises. Fog licked at her ankles as she cut along a canal, lantern-glow breaking across the black water in ripples like torn silk; the air smelled of wet rope, salt, and the stale vinegar of last night's fish fry. She catalogued what came next with the tidy calm she saved for the moments after panic: find a cheap bed that didn't come with bedbugs the size of thumbnail coins—Silkshore had plenty of rooms that pretended to be respectable if you squinted, and she could stomach a squeaky frame if the door had a proper latch; then training, real training, not just the reflexes she'd taught herself by trial and error and luck—she needed to move like a fighter on purpose, not like a survivor on accident, to turn her clumsy corners into angles; a knife she could trust that didn't slide in her grip when it got wet; a better ghost-charm, the kind that didn't die after two hard prayers; chalk that clung to damp stone when she needed it to. Maybe she could contact the Gloam Sisters. People whispered that they were a haven for women who needed protection, at least when the Sisters' aims aligned with mercy; the same mouths also whispered they charged interest in the currency of secrets. Syloki could work with that—she had secrets, some threadbare, some sharp enough to cut. It was clearly important to make contact with anyone from this Cypher group, too; their name kept circling the city's gossip like gulls over a trawler, and if Elias Wren's client bragged about Cypher tech, then following that

wake might carry her straight into the heart of whatever this “toy” truly was. She had very few leads to follow at the moment—Elias’s laughter, Alaric’s door, a back room that swallowed men whole—so she would build more. She’d bribe two or three urchins at the tram stop to memorize Elias’s coat and the men who walked three paces behind him. She’d learn the pawn broker’s delivery hours, the marks scratched on crates, the notes carriers hummed when they didn’t want to remember routes out loud. She’d sit two afternoons in a tea stall across from Wren’s Wonders and count how many times the shutters twitched when no customers were in sight. She’d buy a secondhand ledger and make her columns neat this time: time, face, symbol, route, rumor; she’d draw little circles around names that repeated until patterns emerged like stains. She’d swallow the bruise Alaric’s fingers left on her arm and let it darken into a reminder instead of a wound: don’t take the front door again, don’t wait for the room to turn on you, make the room.

Syloki’s reputation had to begin to grow, not in applause but in results; the people who mattered here listened when money grumbled and when problems stopped existing. Her ability to navigate secrets, confront adversaries, and forge alliances would establish her as a significant player in Doskvol, or at least as someone the city learned to step around rather than over. Her actions and connections would set the stage for new opportunities and new trouble, because the two were twins in this place, reshaping the dynamics of power and influence in the city’s shadowy realm one small leverage at a time. As Doskvol’s landscape continued to evolve, she promised herself she would evolve faster—through deception when she had to, confrontation when pushed, and negotiation whenever a door would open to a softer hand—because this city had made a game of mist and menace, and she intended to learn its rules well enough to bend them.

The Chronicle page in her satchel crackled when she shifted, the headline a hard knot she refused to swallow tonight; the thought still found her, a warm ache under her ribs, a memory more shape than face, a laugh she could almost place if she wasn’t afraid to—she pressed a palm to the paper and kept walking. Bed, training, allies. Gloam if they’d have her. Cyphers if they’d bargain. Elias tomorrow, not as a shadow watching but as a problem to solve. She lifted her hood, let the fog catch in the fringe, and smiled to herself without showing teeth. The city didn’t need to know her yet. It would.

News: Mystery Unfolds at Local Science Fair: Bounty Hunter Arrested, Invention Unveiled Amidst Chaos

In the dimly lit confines of the Shadows' Den, a cosy yet slightly eerie tavern nestled in the heart of Doskvol, two locals sat at a small corner table. The flickering glow of lanterns cast long shadows across their faces, adding a layer of intrigue to their discussion. Agnes Reid, a stout woman in her late forties with a keen interest in the news, was leafing through a well-worn copy of the Blade Chronicle. Her companion, Thomas Shaw, a lanky man in his thirties with a perpetual air of curiosity, sat opposite her, nursing a half-empty pint.

Agnes: (turning the newspaper around to Thomas) "Thomas, you have to see this. It's all over the Blade Chronicle today."

Thomas: (leaning in) "Oh? What's the latest scandal?"

Agnes slid the newspaper across the table, and Thomas scanned the headlines with growing interest.

Thomas: (reading aloud) "'In a startling turn of events at the Inventions fair held last week, what was meant to be a showcase of innovation and discovery turned into a scene of chaos and tragedy.'"

Agnes: "Yes, and it's just dreadful. The fair was supposed to be such a grand event. Now look at it."

Thomas: "Sounds like quite a mess. What happened exactly?"

Agnes: (gesturing at the newspaper) "'Among the central figures of the unfolding drama was Bruce Walunde, a well-known bounty hunter, whose arrest sent shockwaves through the community. Walunde, renowned for his prowess in tracking down elusive targets, found himself on the other side of the law when he was apprehended after sustaining heavy wounds.'"

Thomas: (frowning) "Bruce Walunde? The bounty hunter? He's always been portrayed as a hero in the papers."

Agnes: "That's just it! I can't believe he'd be involved in anything so nefarious. He's always been on the right side of the law."

Thomas: (sceptical) "Well, that's what makes it interesting. Sometimes the public image and reality don't line up."

Agnes: "But Bruce? It doesn't add up. Why would he be in trouble at a science fair of all places?"

Thomas: (continuing to read) "'The circumstances surrounding his arrest remain shrouded in mystery, leaving many to wonder what transpired in the moments leading up to the altercation.'"

Agnes: "See? Even the newspaper isn't clear on why he was arrested. It's not like him at all."

Thomas: (nodding) "That's true. But look here: 'Adding to the confusion was the sudden intrusion of the Espiritas officials, whose presence disrupted the proceedings of the science fair.'"

Agnes: "Espiritas officials? Why would they be involved in a science fair?"

Thomas: (reading on) "'The interruption was caused because of the death of two individuals, identified as employees of the esteemed inventor Garrick Harlowe. Harlowe, widely regarded for his

ingenuity and visionary creations, was on the cusp of unveiling his latest invention to the world—the automobile.'"

Agnes: "Garrick Harlowe's big reveal? The automobile? That was supposed to be a huge breakthrough!"

Thomas: "Exactly. And now it's overshadowed by this mess. 'The revelation of such groundbreaking technology promised to revolutionise transportation as we know it, yet the joyous occasion was marred by tragedy and uncertainty.'"

Agnes: "It's tragic, isn't it? But it still doesn't explain why Bruce would be caught up in this."

Thomas: (sceptical) "Well, sometimes people get tangled up in things they shouldn't be. Bruce could have been at the wrong place at the wrong time—or maybe there's more to it."

Agnes: "But to think Bruce could be involved in something shady? I just don't buy it."

Thomas: (continuing) "'As authorities scrambled to contain the situation, rumours began to circulate regarding the disappearance of a local security guard and three guests in attendance (two men and a woman).'"

Agnes: "Disappearance? That's not just chaos; it's a full-blown mystery. And the police aren't saying anything more."

Thomas: "Yes, and look at this: 'Attempts to glean further information from the police have been met with silence, fueling speculation and intrigue within the community.'"

Agnes: "It's like they're deliberately hiding something. But Bruce being involved? I just don't think so."

Thomas: "You might be right, or maybe he's being framed. Either way, something doesn't sit right. 'Amidst the turmoil and unanswered questions, one thing remains clear: the events that unfolded at the science fair have left a lasting impact on all those involved. As the investigation continues and the truth slowly emerges from the shadows, residents are left to ponder the implications of this fateful day—a day that will be remembered not for the triumphs of science, but for the mysteries that remain unsolved.'"

Agnes: "That's the part that really gets to me. So many questions, and no clear answers."

Thomas: "Exactly. I mean, Bruce Walunde could be the hero or the scapegoat in this. We don't know yet. But I wouldn't be too quick to rule out anything."

Agnes: "I suppose. But Bruce has always seemed so above board. Maybe it's just a misunderstanding."

Thomas: "Could be. Or maybe there's a darker side to this whole mess. The fair's collapse, Bruce's arrest—it all seems too coincidental."

Agnes: "Well, if Bruce really is involved in something shady, I'd want to know the full story before jumping to conclusions."

Thomas: "Agreed. In the meantime, let's keep our ears open. There's bound to be more coming out about this."

Agnes: "Definitely. And I'll be watching closely. This story is far from over."

As their conversation wound down, both Agnes and Thomas sat in thoughtful silence. The newspaper, now folded and set aside, served as a stark reminder of the complex and often murky nature of Doskvol's news. Their discussion had highlighted the divide between faith in Bruce Walunde's integrity and scepticism about the true nature of the unfolding events.

Chapter 3: **A Name in the Dark**

Arthur's boots thudded softly against the narrow floorboards, the dim corridor stretching out before him like a vein carved through the machine's belly. The air was close down here, warmer than it had any right to be, tinged with solder-smoke and the metallic bite of oil that clung to his tongue when he breathed in too deep. Behind him, the memory of Judith's dry voice still lingered—the little small talk exchanged in the shop above, her sharp eyes hiding under a kind smile as she'd nudged him toward the back door with the air of someone who'd long ago given up asking questions she didn't want answers to. The single bulb dangling overhead flickered, casting a jittering light along the brass piping that snaked like veins along the walls, hissing quietly where steam leaked through imperfect seals. Arthur reached the final door, the hum of conversation beyond it already pushing against the wood. He pressed his hand to the iron latch and pulled.

Light spilled out at once, a pale electroplasmic glow flooding the dark corridor and throwing his shadow long against the boards behind him. The low murmur of machines blended with voices, and as he stepped inside the circular chamber the scene unfolded like a familiar stage. Lannic sat at the head of the oak table, his scarred face half in shadow, the brass finger clicking idly against a rolled blueprint. Silas leaned back in his chair, his coat stretched taut across his shoulders, a smirk already tugging at his mouth as his cold eyes flicked up toward Arthur. Adrian was closest, half risen from his seat with a glass already in hand, the bottle of dark amber open beside him and its sharp, sweet smell threading into the air between them.

Arthur barely crossed the threshold before greetings cut through the room—Lannic's gravelly "Xavier," Silas's sharp nod that passed for courtesy, Adrian's easy grin as he reached to clasp Arthur's shoulder in a brief handshake. The warmth of the glass pressed into Arthur's palm next, Adrian pouring him a fresh measure without asking, the liquid sloshing rich and golden in the dim light. Arthur muttered a thanks, the rim already cool against his fingers as he raised it slightly in silent salute. Silas's voice broke in, dry and edged with that sarcasm he wore like a second skin. "We were just talking about you, Arthur." The corner of his mouth curled in mock amusement.

Arthur let a low chuckle answer him, shaking his head. "I should have known," he said, settling into the empty chair between them. "My ears have been burning all the way down that bloody corridor." The faintest ripple of laughter passed the table, even from Lannic, who leaned forward now, his ruined face creasing with something close to satisfaction. His gray eye flicked between them all before he raised his glass. "Good," he said, his voice carrying weight and command in equal measure. "Because tonight, the core of the Cyphers sit under one roof." Arthur leaned back in the chair, the wood creaking faintly under his weight as he swirled the amber in his glass. "So what's on the ledger tonight?" he asked, his voice calm but carrying that edge of expectation, like a craftsman waiting to see if the tool he'd forged would cut as clean as promised.

Silas was the first to answer, his tone dry, almost casual. "It was you who met those new guys in town, right?" His eyes flicked toward Arthur, sharp as a blade in low light. Arthur gave a small nod, lifting his glass slightly in confirmation. "Yes. I think it was you who hand-picked them," he said, pointing across the table at Lannic before continuing. "Jack, I think. You wanted to test them with some task. How did they go?" At that, Lannic's ruined face shifted into something rare—an open smile that cracked his stern composure. He leaned forward, brass finger clicking against the clasp of the folder beside him. "Wonderfully. Guys, look at this." He spread the folder wide across the oak table, the pale light catching the crisp edges of the papers inside. Adrian

leaned in first, his breath catching as he skimmed the top sheet. “They actually pulled it off,” he said in open admiration, his hand brushing over the intricate diagrams. “Oh my god.”

Silas snorted low, but even he couldn’t mask the glint of approval in his eyes as he pulled one page closer. “Wow… this is the blueprints for the automobile.” His tone carried disbelief, edged with something almost hungry. Arthur took his time, sliding the paper across, his gloved fingers smoothing it flat as he studied the lines and curves of ink. He nodded once, slow and deliberate. “This blueprint carries great potential,” he said, the weight in his voice underscoring every word. Lannic returned the nod, gray eye sharp, the smile still tugging faintly at his lips. “So do those new guys from Crow’s Ward,” he added, voice low but steady. Arthur lifted his gaze, studying Lannic’s expression, a hint of puzzlement drawing across his features. “Recruiting material?” he asked, his tone curious, cautious. Lannic leaned back in his chair, his brass finger tapping once against the table in thought. His scarred face was unreadable as silence hung for a beat too long. Finally, he exhaled, voice quiet but weighted. “I’m not sure they would want that. I don’t get that vibe from… Jack the Boy… is this what he was called?”

Silas leaned back in his chair, the leather creaking under his weight as he took a long sip from his glass, the amber liquor catching the pale blue light of the chandelier above. He lowered it slow, setting it down with a deliberate clink against the oak before turning his sharp eyes toward Arthur. “Wait till you hear this. Wanna repeat to him what you just said to us, Lannic?” His voice carried that lazy sarcasm that always felt like it was testing the air, daring someone to deny him. The smoke from his half-burned cigarette curled upward in a lazy spiral, drifting across the table like a shadow that refused to settle.

All eyes shifted to Lannic, whose scarred face seemed to tighten as he leaned forward, the brass finger of his mechanical hand tapping once against the folder still resting open at his elbow. He let the silence stretch just long enough to feel like a weight before speaking, his voice low and steady, with that hint of gravel that came from too many years of smoke and fire. “Well, those guys can be dangerously reckless,” he said, his gaze flicking briefly to Adrian as if to confirm the thought. “They almost got arrested, like you said they would.” He paused, turning his glass slowly in his hand, the ice inside chiming softly, then continued, “They barely managed to escape capture and even managed to push the blame for the entire mess they made onto someone else.”

Arthur leaned forward now, his elbows resting against the table, goggles catching the light as he narrowed his eyes in curiosity. “Who? Who did they blame?” The question cut the air, sharp, impatient. Lannic set his glass down with a dull thud and met Arthur’s stare evenly. “Bruce Wallunde.” The name hung there, heavy as iron, and Arthur’s expression shifted—first disbelief, then something closer to disdain. “Bruce? The bounty hunter? What was he doing there after all?” His voice was incredulous, almost mocking, as if the very idea was absurd. Lannic only shrugged, his burned features unreadable, the faintest grimace curling his mouth. “I don’t know. My best guess is he was already after them.” Adrian let out a short burst of laughter, shaking his head as he leaned back, fingers drumming against his glass. “They are already getting in trouble with all sorts in Doskvol, that much is clear.” Arthur’s jaw tightened as he pushed, his voice quieter but no less cutting. “How did they blame him and make it stick?”

The room seemed to draw in closer as Lannic answered, his voice even, deliberate, as though speaking each word carved it deeper into the table. “Mind manipulation. One of those guys can erase memory. Bruce couldn’t even remember what happened. He couldn’t even fight for his name.” At that, the chatter of machinery in the walls filled the silence—the slow hiss of steam pipes, the ticking of brass gears turning somewhere unseen—while the four men sat heavy in thought, the weight of it pressing against them. No one reached for their glass. No one spoke. The only sound was the hum of the chandelier above, its pale light reflecting off their faces, each expression carved with its own unease. The table, cluttered with blueprints and coin,

suddenly felt less like a place of invention and more like the stage of a play that had shifted into darker territory.

Adrian finally broke the silence, his voice a little too quick, a little too sharp, as though he had been holding it back with his teeth. “How long will Bruce get for this?” His fingers tapped restlessly against the rim of his glass, knuckles pale in the pale chandelier light. Lannic exhaled through his nose, slow, measured, the sound more like steam venting from a pressure valve than a sigh. “Actually,” he said, his tone flat, almost casual, “he is already out.” The reaction was immediate—three voices colliding in the same instant, the word *what?* cracking across the table like a whip, disbelief carved raw into their faces. Arthur’s brows drew down in a frown, Silas leaned forward with his drink frozen halfway to his lips, Adrian’s glass slipped against the oak with a faint scrape. But Lannic didn’t flinch. He simply continued, his scarred features unreadable. “Yeah, he was arrested, but is already out. Some say a breakout. Though if you know the Wallundes well, you’d guess the same as me. They’re filthy rich. Bruce was a bounty hunter for sport. It’s my personal opinion he bribed his way out.”

Arthur let out a low, almost involuntary sound—“Damn”—before tipping his glass back and taking a long, steady sip, the burn of the liquor deepening the lines at the corners of his eyes. Lannic leaned an elbow against the table, turning his brass finger idly against the wood as he pressed on. “Yeah, he’s out there. And it’s said all he remembers is the invention fair. He’ll be livid, trying to find who erased his memory.” The room seemed to darken a shade at that, the mechanical hums in the walls filling the brief pause. Silas’s expression grew thoughtful, his eyes narrowing as if tracing the path of a fuse he could already hear hissing. “If I was in his place,” he said slowly, “I would connect it to us. I mean, it’s a clear line of thought, isn’t it? Inventions fair heist. Inventions. Cyphers.” His words hung there like smoke, too heavy to ignore.

Lannic nodded once, the movement precise, deliberate, his ruined side catching the faintest glint of the chandelier’s pale glow. “Stay vigilant out there, at least till we know for sure he won’t blame us.” All three men nodded in agreement, the gesture uniform but each carrying its own weight—Arthur’s slow and heavy, Silas’s sharp and clipped, Adrian’s quick and restless. The tension in the air loosened only slightly when Lannic gestured with his hand, an open palm sweeping toward the bottle at the center of the table. “Serve yourselves more drinks.” His voice softened, but only by degrees, enough to make space for something else. He waited until the glasses were lifted, until the clink of pouring liquor and shifting ice filled the brief gap, then set his good eye on them with a steady intensity. “Well,” he said at last, his tone shifting, deeper, more deliberate. “Now that this is out of the way, let’s talk real business, gentlemen.”

Lannic turned his gaze on Arthur, the weight of it steady and deliberate, the gray of his ruined eye catching the light like dull steel. “I have some updates for your investigation, Arthur. From some of our informants.” His voice carried the kind of calm that made men lean in without realizing they were doing it. All three men shifted almost in unison, their postures sharpening, chairs creaking faintly as they sat up straighter, more attentive now than they had been all evening. The smoke of their drinks curled upward, thin and restless, as if the air itself sensed the shift. “There is a meeting occurring soon,” Lannic continued, his brass finger ticking once against the rim of his glass like the beat of a clock. “Two days, if I’m correct.” Adrian was the first to break the silence, leaning forward with his elbows braced on the table, eyes bright with curiosity. “It must be important, if you’re so interested.” His voice carried both awe and caution, the blend of a man who knew Lannic’s attention was rarely wasted. Lannic only nodded, slow and measured, and then laid the words down with the gravity of stone. “It involves three heads. Emberlash. Emberwing. And Lira Quinval.”

The name hung in the air like smoke that wouldn’t clear. Silence closed over the table at once, heavy, suffocating, filled with the faint tick of pipes in the walls and the low hum of a distant gear somewhere deep in the emporium’s belly. Arthur’s eyes narrowed, the faint scrape of his thumb

against the glass the only sound he made before he finally spoke. “The top heads of the Ember Circle and the head of the Gloam Sisters under one roof?” His tone was low, deliberate, weighed with suspicion. “That smells like trouble.” Lannic’s mouth tugged faintly into something that wasn’t quite a smile. “Precisely. Try to infiltrate it. Get a team of the young ones. Get some of the trinkets. Do what you must.” His words carried no room for hesitation, only the iron of command.

Adrian straightened even more, his chair legs scraping softly against the floor as he spoke up. “Count with me as back up.” The quickness of his words was matched by the conviction in his eyes, and Arthur gave a slow nod of thanks in return, raising his glass in quiet acknowledgment before tipping back another sip. The liquor burned steady down his throat, but his mind was already miles ahead, lost in the gears and shadows of what this meeting meant, the shape of dangers assembling in Doskvol’s underbelly. Around the table, the conversation continued to unfurl, details traded like cards, plans drawn in low voices as the pale chandelier swayed ever so slightly overhead. The smell of solder and ink still clung to the room, the faint hum of machines pressing at the edges of the air, and beneath it all the Cyphers plotted, each word another cog set into motion as they prepared for the storm gathering two nights away.

The binoculars pressed cool against Arthur’s brow, the metal edges biting just faintly into his skin as he adjusted the focus with a small twist of the knurled dial. The lenses caught the last bands of daylight spilling across the rooftops, painting the brickwork in tired shades of rust and shadow while the streets below slouched into evening. Workers shuffled away from the warehouse with the loose-limbed weariness of men whose bodies were long out of fight, their boots dragging dust, their voices low and muttered like the grumble of an engine winding down. One man wiped his hands on a rag blackened with soot, another lit a pipe with trembling fingers, and all of them melted into the veins of Ashvale, toward dim lanterns and thin suppers. The building itself, squat and windowless, looked ordinary enough—an unremarkable scar in a district stitched with too many of them. Yet Arthur held the binoculars steady, watching, waiting, listening to the rhythm of departure until only silence and shadows kept the walls company.

Beside him, Adrian shifted his weight with the quiet impatience of a man who wanted movement more than stillness. His voice cut into the air, low but edged with a restlessness he hadn’t quite managed to drown with his flask. “Are you sure this is the place?” he asked, his eyes fixed on the hulking outline of the warehouse, suspicion in the sharp lines of his jaw.

Arthur didn’t lower the binoculars. His voice came even, clipped, shaped around the discipline of certainty, though the edges betrayed his own questions. “The intel confirms it. This is the place tonight.” The words were firm enough, but he knew their truth rested on whispers and coin and the kinds of informants who were more desperate than loyal. He swept the lenses again across the darkening street, tracing every figure that lingered too long, every movement that could be a guard or just another weary man with nothing but debt to his name.

Inside his head, though, the questions gnawed louder than Adrian’s voice had. Why here? Charhollow was no man’s territory worth mentioning—not for the Ember Circle, not for the Gloam Sisters. This was Stoneborn ground, a place where half-feral orphans darted through alleys like shadows given teeth. The Stoneborn weren’t kings of anything, but they weren’t fools either; they bled their enemies in sudden strikes, hit and vanish, a hundred cuts from a hundred angles before anyone knew where the blade had come from. They thrived on guerrilla strikes and the city’s neglect, slipping through the cracks faster than the law could name them. And because of that, most of Doskvol’s proper powers—smugglers, thieves, cults, merchants with too many guards—left them alone. If not provoked, those wild dogs stayed in their corner and gnawed only on their own bones.

Arthur's mouth tightened into a thin line as he lowered the binoculars just a fraction, the dusky light reflecting in the glass like a faint fire. For the Ember Circle and the Gloam Sisters to meet here, in the very heart of that chaos, it reeked of something wrong. Not their style. Not their place. This was a territory the Stoneborn called theirs, and though they were hardly the kind of faction to put fear into the city's true powers, Arthur knew better than most that ignoring them was safer than dragging them into games they didn't belong to. If the intel was true, if these names were truly gathering here tonight, then either something had shifted in Doskvol's order or he and the Cyphers were walking into a snare laid under someone else's flag. The thought sat heavy in his chest, like the warehouse itself was already leaning over him, ready to fall.

Adrian stood just beside Arthur, his broad frame catching what little light the dying sun spilled over Charhollow's rooftops. His dark coat was long and weathered, cut to fit him close without ever restricting his movements, the heavy fabric brushing against his boots as the evening breeze tugged faintly at its hem. A thick scarf was wound tight around his neck, not for fashion but for function, a muted gray that blended into the city's shadows. His face bore the kind of calm that came from men used to operating in dangerous places, but beneath it, there was always that restless energy, the twitch of fingers near his belt as if they missed the weight of a tool or weapon. His jaw was strong, his expression firm, framed by hair just long enough to be pulled back but left loose, the strands shifting when the wind passed. His eyes carried a sharpness to them, pale enough to catch light, steady enough to make any man pause when they landed. There was no excess about him—everything he wore, everything he carried, spoke of precision, practicality, and a quiet refusal to be caught unprepared.

"Man, this place is strange for them to meet," Adrian muttered, his tone heavy with suspicion as his eyes lingered on the plain silhouette of the warehouse. Arthur lowered his binoculars slightly, nodding in agreement, his voice calm but taut. "Yeah, you read my mind, Adrian. Something doesn't fit. But let's watch carefully. Are the newbies in position?" Adrian shifted slightly, his shoulders rolling under the coat as he kept his eyes forward. "They should be, yeah," he replied, though the edge in his voice carried the weight of someone who never fully trusted 'should.' The two of them fell into silence then, the kind that wasn't empty but alive with the sounds of the city: the last clatter of workers' boots fading into cobblestones, the distant creak of a cart's wheel, the soft hiss of lanterns being lit one by one until their glow painted uneven circles across the streets. The dull light of the sun gave way to shadow, and with it the district shifted—day's noise thinning into night's quiet, the world narrowing into flickers of flame and long black gaps where anything could wait unseen.

Arthur's gaze sharpened as he finally caught movement. Hooded figures, their steps steady but cloaked in the anonymity of dusk, made their way toward the warehouse. They slipped inside without hesitation, their shapes swallowed by the heavy door after working hours had ended. Arthur's voice came low, almost a breath more than a word. "We have some action." In silence, both men began to move, their boots soft against the cobblestones as they crept under the cover of shadows. The night welcomed them as only Doskvol's streets could—smoke and fog twisting together to conceal, every lantern-light a reminder that safety here was always fleeting. Together, they slipped closer, slow and deliberate, advancing toward the warehouse with the patience of men who knew how easily one wrong step could burn them alive.

At the entrance to the warehouse, Arthur and Adrian stood shoulder to shoulder, the wooden doors looming over them like the jaws of some patient beast waiting for the first careless move. The smell of tar and coal dust clung thick in the air, seeping from the nearby furnaces of Charhollow, and the only sound was the faint creak of ropes swaying on forgotten pulleys above. Adrian's hand slipped inside his coat, steady and deliberate, until it drew out the short metal rod, no longer than a forearm, capped at either end with gems that caught what little lantern-glow bled from the street. He lowered himself to one knee on the cobblestones, the coat brushing against damp stone, his movements quiet but precise, practiced like a ritual he'd

repeated countless times. With a sharp motion, he struck the rod against the ground. The crack of gem against stone echoed faintly, a brittle sound that seemed too loud in the silence, and one end of the rod splintered with a dull fracture.

Arthur's eyes followed every flicker of light, his hand hovering near the leather strap of the satchel at his hip, his jaw set hard. He knew the weight of that tool, knew what it meant to break it now, here, in the shadow of a warehouse that might already be watching them back. He leaned closer, his breath held tight in his chest as the other gem, whole and unbroken, pulsed once in the dark. The faintest glimmer of blue teased its edges, then faded as quickly as it came. Nothing lingered, no ghostlight, no telltale hum of arcane wards thrumming in the air. To anyone else, it would have looked like a dead piece of glass. But to Arthur, it meant more—it meant the Gloam Sisters had not littered this place with their spectral snares. Not yet, at least. But he knew better than to call it safe. Absence wasn't proof. It never was in Doskvol.

He exhaled slow, the fog of his breath curling faint and pale in the night, then lifted his hand, fingers cutting silent signals through the air. His eyes locked on Adrian's for only a heartbeat, but that was enough. A sharp flick upward, two fingers extended: find height, find vantage. Arthur would take the low ground, the cracks in the walls, the doors left to rust but never forgotten. Adrian gave a single nod, the kind that didn't need words, and rose smoothly to his feet, tucking the rod back into his coat as though it had never left. Without a sound, he slipped away, his shadow stretching long before it vanished against the stacked crates and ladders that spidered up the warehouse walls. Arthur adjusted his grip on the binoculars, then shifted to the side door, his boots barely whispering against the cobblestones, every muscle drawn tight with the weight of quiet expectation.

At the side door, Arthur crouched low, the rusted lock staring back at him like a single blind eye. He slid his picks into place, the faint scrape of metal on metal sounding louder than he liked in the stillness. The tumblers inside resisted—not stiff, not impossibly so, but just enough to raise the hairs at the back of his neck. Was this resistance deliberate? Was it the kind of lock meant to stall him, to make him second-guess, to buy unseen eyes the time to draw a bead on his skull? His jaw clenched as sweat pricked beneath the leather strap of his goggles. Every instinct screamed trap, screamed ambush, screamed that he was already being watched. But when the last tumbler clicked and the door eased open on a long, aching groan, there was nothing. No sudden hiss of arcane wards. No spectral flare. Just the stale tang of old wood and dust drifting out into the night. Too mundane, too plain. That was its own kind of menace.

He slipped inside, every movement measured, shoulders brushing against shadowed beams as his eyes adjusted to the gloom. His hand hovered near his weapon but didn't draw yet—steel was a declaration, and silence was the better shield. Step by step, he crept deeper, sweeping the corners, his gaze dragging over crates stacked like barricades, tarps hanging limp from the rafters, and the uneasy stillness of air that felt too thick for an empty building. Then he found it: the open space at the heart of the warehouse. And with it, the figures.

Dozens of them. Scores. Close to a hundred, hooded and draped in identical robes, standing in eerie ranks as though waiting for a command that would never come. Arthur froze at the threshold, his breath catching sharp against the back of his throat. His heart slammed once, hard enough to ache in his ribs, then again, faster. He pressed himself into the shadow of a beam, willing the pounding in his chest to quiet, forcing the cold discipline of control back into his blood. They weren't moving. Not one. Not a shift of fabric, not a twitch of a hand. The silence in the room was worse than noise, worse than whispers—it was the silence of something wrong, the silence of a stage set without actors.

Slowly, deliberately, he crossed the gap, boots rolling soft against the dust-gritted floor. He circled toward the nearest hooded figure, every step measured, every breath shallow, his body

strung tight with anticipation. The hood was low, hiding the face. The stillness unnatural. Arthur moved in behind, low and fast, snapping forward with a sudden grab meant to take the figure down in one clean motion, his weight already shifting to pin it. His grip caught fabric, yanked hard—and the body beneath gave nothing. No breath, no resistance, no flesh. Just hollow weight collapsing into his hands. The robe sagged, slumped, and the truth stared back at him.

A mannequin. A painted, lifeless doll.

Arthur's stomach sank, the tension in his shoulders shifting into something colder, something darker. He let the figure drop, the hollow thunk echoing in the cavernous silence. "Well," he muttered under his breath, voice low and edged with grim humor, "that explains the silence." His words seemed to vanish before they traveled, swallowed by the oppressive stillness, and for the first time since stepping inside, Arthur felt the trap was no longer a question but a certainty.

Arthur slipped his hand into his coat pocket and drew out the compass, its brass casing dulled with years of use, the glass scratched but still clear enough to read. It wasn't a compass in the ordinary sense—its needle had no loyalty to north. Instead, it had been tuned, calibrated with care and a little trick of engineering, to point toward Adrian. Their tether for nights exactly like this one. He held it low, letting the pale glow of lantern light catch on the needle, watching as it trembled, then steadied, angled just slightly to the left. Arthur followed its line with his eyes, scanning the upper levels of the warehouse until movement caught his gaze. There—Adrian, standing at the rail of a stairwell above, his dark coat cutting a sharp silhouette against the shadows, his face lit faintly by the weak gleam of streetlamps that slipped through a high window. His eyes met Arthur's, steady, and then his hands moved in crisp, practiced motions.

The language was theirs, born of necessity and tempered by long nights where words would have cost them their lives. Adrian's fingers flicked sharp against the dim light. *What the fuck is this?* Arthur's reply was immediate, precise, his gloved hand rising in controlled motions. *Not alive. All fake. See anything?* Adrian's answer came with a small shake of his head before his hands spoke again. *Nothing. All quiet. All normal. Except this freaky space.* Arthur's jaw tightened as he responded, each sign clipped, deliberate. *Be careful. Might be a trap.* Adrian's answer was quick, almost impatient. *You be careful. Coming to you.* The exchange ended with a mutual nod, brief but loaded with the weight of years. Then Adrian's figure melted back into the dark, vanishing from the railing like smoke.

Arthur did not stand idle. The warehouse pressed in too close, the silence too wrong, the army of mannequins around him too carefully placed to be ignored. He slipped deeper into their ranks, boots whispering across the dusty planks, shoulders brushing the heavy fabric of lifeless robes. His fingers trailed once across one mannequin's sleeve, the rough weave stiff beneath his touch, and he felt the hollow frame beneath it. Each figure stood like an echo of presence, arranged deliberately, an audience waiting for a performance that would never begin. His breath fogged faint in the cool air as he moved, the faint creak of wood beneath him echoing too loud.

He glanced down again at the compass, its needle quivering faintly as though aware of the wrongness in the air, and then steadied his pace, angling himself in the direction it pointed. Toward Adrian. His mind ticked like a clock as he walked, every mannequin a question without an answer. Why here, in Charhollow of all places? Why now, under the cover of workers leaving for their homes? And why dress a room in an army of hollow shells instead of living conspirators? The meeting they were meant to infiltrate hung heavy in his mind, a thread that felt stretched too far from the truth. Arthur let his eyes flick up toward the shadows above, then back to the still compass in his palm, his steps slow, careful, as though each one pressed him deeper into the heart of whatever this night was meant to reveal.

Arthur should have paid more attention, but the steady pull of the compass needle had lulled him into a rhythm—glance down, step forward, glance up, check shadows, repeat. He let his gaze dip one too many times. Passing between two mannequins draped in identical robes, the silence broke with a sudden crack of metal against flesh. Pain shot through the back of his legs as something hard and unyielding smashed into him, buckling his knees and sending him crashing to the ground. The compass slipped from his fingers, skittering across the planks with a hollow scrape before spinning to a stop, its needle twitching uselessly.

Arthur tried to twist, tried to roll with the fall, but the weight was already on him—a hooded figure that wasn't lifeless at all, driving him down, pinning his shoulders to the boards with brutal efficiency. The air left his lungs in a sharp grunt as the struggle unfolded in jerks and snarls, his hands clawing for leverage, boots kicking against the planks. Then it came—a sudden jolt of energy, sharp and biting, tearing through his body with enough force to snap every nerve taut. His muscles seized, his jaw clenched involuntarily, and the fight bled from his limbs in an instant. The bastard had a taser, primed and waiting. Arthur's body sagged, unwilling, betrayed by its own nerves, his chest heaving against the crushing grip that held him.

He forced himself to still, to stop thrashing, to let the moment shift. His mind, even under the buzzing echo of the shock, snapped to a sharper edge. If he was caught, then the only way forward was to face it. The hooded figure loomed above him, breath heavy, and then with deliberate slowness pulled back the hood. Arthur's eyes locked onto the face revealed beneath—and shock froze him colder than the taser ever had. "Bruce?" he rasped, voice caught between disbelief and fury. The recognition was a blade in his gut. Damn it. He had walked straight into it, fallen for the trap laid out like bait in the dark.

Bruce Wallunde's face was carved with calm malice, every line tightened with resolve. His voice, when it came, was steady, chilling, carrying a quiet venom that made the silence of the warehouse feel even heavier. "Thought you could sneak around, did you, Xavier?" The words cut through the dim light like iron, each syllable deliberate, and Arthur felt the weight of them settle on his chest as heavily as the man himself.

"Bruce Wallunde? I didn't expect you here. What's the meaning of this?" Arthur forced the words out through clenched teeth, his voice sharp but low, the instinct to stay quiet in enemy ground fighting with the raw irritation boiling in his chest. The name alone carried weight, and yet the sight of the man before him was stranger still. Bruce's eyes had a wildness that Arthur hadn't seen before, a flicker of something not entirely steady, a mind running too hot, too fast. The bounty hunter's jaw tightened, and his voice came out in a rasp edged with obsession. "I've been waiting for you. You're the one who's been meddling in my affairs, aren't you? The mind games, the manipulation—you're part of it, and I'm going to get answers." His words carried a tremor, not of fear but of desperation, the kind of unhinged certainty that made the air feel colder.

Arthur's goggles caught the faint light as his brow furrowed, disbelief sharpening his tone. "What the fuck are you talking about?" His voice cut through the stillness, but Bruce never answered. Instead, his body jerked in a sudden roll, instinctive, animal-fast, and Arthur realized why a second later. A shadow loomed up behind him—Adrian, swinging hard with a length of rusted pipe he'd torn from somewhere in the rafters. The blow connected but only at an angle, glancing off Bruce's shoulder with a hollow thud. The man grunted, twisting with the hit, but his reflexes carried him into the mannequins, vanishing back into the shifting maze of robed figures. The sound of fabric brushing wood and the faint creak of boards swallowed him whole, leaving only silence in his wake.

Arthur scrambled back to his feet, his body still buzzing from the earlier shock, but his stance steadying quick. He cast a sharp look at Adrian, muttering a quick, breathless, "Thanks," before

snapping his gaze to the dark. He tried to steady his breathing, tried to force the adrenaline into focus instead of panic. His voice carried steady, though his pulse pounded in his throat. “Look, Bruce, I don’t know what you’re talking about. I’m here to gather information about the meeting. If you’ve got a problem with me, let’s resolve this without all the traps and theatrics.” The words echoed against the cavernous silence of the warehouse, slipping through the rows of mannequins like a challenge.

What came back was laughter—ragged, sharp, and threaded with anger, bouncing off the walls in a way that made it impossible to pin down the source. It wasn’t the laugh of a man in control. It was raw, bitter, the sound of someone choking on his own fury. “Do you think you know what’s going on here tonight?” Bruce’s voice bled through the dark, vibrating with rage, dripping with venom, and under it all something fractured, a fury that sounded less like a man hunting answers and more like a man being consumed by the lack of them.

Out of the shadows, something small clinked against the floorboards—a faint metallic rattle that spun to a stop between the rows of hooded mannequins. Arthur’s eyes narrowed a heartbeat before the hiss began. A smoke bomb cracked open, spilling thick, acrid clouds that spread like a living thing, coiling low at first, then rising to choke the air. The warehouse dissolved into shifting gray veils, swallowing the mannequins until they seemed to breathe and twitch in the haze, an army of faceless figures pressing in on all sides. Between the darkness, the still-robed silhouettes, and now the rolling tide of smoke, there would be no spotting Bruce. He had the ground, the shadows, and the tempo. Arthur felt it sink cold into his gut—this meeting was nothing but a carefully laid snare, hours of planning thrown into a trap sprung with cruel precision. They had wasted their time tonight, and worse, they were caught in Bruce Wallunde’s hunt.

Arthur yanked a strip of cloth from his coat pocket, looping it fast around his mouth and nose, the bitter taste of soot already clawing at his throat. Beside him, Adrian tugged his scarf up over his face, his eyes hard, his breath shallow through the fabric. They moved in sync, backs pressed against each other, the touch solid and grounding in the fog that threatened to strip them of all bearings. Neither spoke. They didn’t need to. Both drew their weapons in the same breath, steel rasping and settling into their hands like an extension of their own resolve. The air grew tighter, the silence broken only by the faint hiss of smoke filling every gap, every hollow, until it became the warehouse’s new heartbeat. There was no slipping out unseen now. No shadow they could trust to hide in.

The voice came then, sharp and furious, but warped by the smoke, bouncing and bending so it came from everywhere at once. “Do you think you can just walk away from what you’ve done?” Bruce’s growl cut through the haze, obsessive, wounded, burning with venom. “You and your friends have made my life hell, and I want to know why.” The words hadn’t even fully faded when a burst flared in the smoke—a muzzle flash, brief and blinding. The crack of the gunshot echoed like thunder in the cavernous space. Adrian cried out, the sound raw and guttural as the bullet tore into his shoulder, his body twisting with the impact. He grit his teeth against the pain and, through sheer reflex, snapped his arm up and fired back into the gray void. The report of his pistol split the air, the spark carving a fleeting path through the haze, but the echo that followed told them nothing had been hit. Bruce was still out there, hidden, the smoke swallowing him whole again.

Smoke crawled low across the floorboards, curling around Xavier’s boots like a living thing tasting for heat, while the mannequins loomed as a packed congregation of hooded silhouettes frozen mid-sermon. The cloth over his mouth tasted of salt and old dust, and each breath rasped loud enough in his own skull to feel like a giveaway. Adrian’s shoulder brushed his back at intervals, a steady metronome in the murk, the two of them pivoting in a tight circle so no angle stayed uncovered for long. Somewhere high in the rafters a pulley squealed and fell

silent, as if the building itself were holding its breath with them. The gas in the smoke bomb left a sour tang that burned the nose before it ever reached the throat. Xavier tracked the warehouse by sound—the soft tick of cooling metal, the distant drip of condensation, the tiny scuttle of grit under a boot that wasn't his or Adrian's. His gloved finger found the trigger guard and settled there without tension, ready to lift at the hint of a human shape that moved wrong. From the dark between two ranks of robed figures came the faintest scrape, and everything inside him strung itself tighter than wire.

Bruce moved with a hunter's certainty, a rush of cloth and a whisper of rubber soles cutting across the boards, and Xavier turned in the same instant, dodging by inches. A cluster of thumb-sized charges went off around them—first the crisp pop, then a concussive thump that slapped his lungs and made the mannequins shiver on their stands. Glass somewhere shattered into bright rain; a tin bucket skittered, ringing dully until it met a post and died. The shockwave wobbled the hanging lights, sending their shadows lurching like black water against the walls. Splinters rode the air like angry wasps, pricking at his cheek and the back of his hand where the glove had worn thin. He smelled burnt powder, old rope, and the metallic breath of oxidized iron warming under friction. The smoke thickened in surges as if a bellows were on it, turning aisles into tunnels and tunnels into blind wells. Every time he blinked, the world came back grainy and gray, and every figure ahead of him looked ready to drop a hood and bite.

"I knew you'd come sniffing around eventually," Bruce's voice rang, hard and cold, bouncing off girders so it seemed to circle them both. "Who were those people that attacked the Inventions Fair? Who stole the blueprints and killed the guards?" The words clanged like iron bars, heavy with certainty that had rotted into obsession, and the echoes made it impossible to pin down where he was. Xavier kept his muzzle low and his tone lower, aiming calm into the fog like a lifeline. "I don't know who they were," he said, measuring each syllable as if it were weight on a scale. "I've been busy with other operations, elsewhere, away from your mess, away from the Fair." He let a beat pass, listening for the telltale hitch of lungs after a sprint. "You've got to believe me—I'm not involved in whatever you're accusing me of, not by intent, not by accident."

"Intent doesn't matter when a man's memories are knifed clean," Bruce snarled, voice skidding closer, then farther, as if he were pacing the ring of mannequins with a predator's patience. "Mind games, erasures, neat little gaps where hours used to live—someone played in my skull, Xavier, and you wear the right stink." A hooded form toppled in the smoke with a wooden clack and lay there like a body that refused to breathe, and the sound clawed down Xavier's spine before his mind caught up and labeled it harmless. "Those blueprints went missing under a storm of clever hands and cleverer machines," Bruce pressed, every word sanded on anger. "So you'll forgive me if the Cyphers sound like the choir behind the hymn." Xavier squared his shoulders against Adrian's and forced the pragmatist's answer through the heat. "Choirs sing for coin; we work for proofs," he said, and his own voice felt like a gear engaging. "Bring me what you think you know, and I'll show you where it slips." The smoke licked his eyelashes, and he blinked away wetness that wasn't fear.

Adrian broke in, voice raw and bright with fury behind the scarf. "Goddamn lunatic—The Cyphers had nothing to do with your memory loss, you fucking idiot!" His words cracked the haze like a thrown bottle, and something in the dark flinched at the force of them. "If anyone, it was that new crew set up at Crow's Foot," he added, each consonant a shove in the ribs, each vowel the clang of a gate. A mannequin beside him wobbled and pitched forward, face-first into the boards with a hollow thud that sent chalky dust puffing up around its carved hands. Gunmetal clicked somewhere to their right, and both men twisted as one, muzzles cutting through smoke to stitch triangles of threat into the darkness. "Hear that, Bruce?" Adrian goaded, breath coming harder now, the pain in it edged with contempt. "Wrong church, wrong sermon, wrong priest." The only answer at first was a slow exhale from the unseen man, long enough to sound like a promise.

Xavier felt Bruce’s silence gathering weight, the way a storm gathers weight beyond the ridge line, and he tried to wedge reason into the space before it broke. “You don’t want a bloodbath in a room full of wood and lies,” he said, keeping the barrel down so the words could walk out in front. “You want the truth that sits under whatever story you’ve been sold, and I can help you find the seam.” Adrian nudged his boot against a toppled stand, dragging it with a scrape to break up the approach, and their shoulders shifted in tandem, the orbit tightening. “Step into the open and talk like a man who wants answers, not a ghost who wants noise,” Xavier added, and the smoke shivered in a draft as if someone had just slipped past a door. Bruce’s laugh came back thin and ragged, a blade wrapped in paper. “Answers are what a thief promises when he’s caught with the lockpick in his hand,” he said, and the way he said caught felt personal enough to bruise. “Who paid those kids, Xavier? Who turned a fairground into a ledger of dead men and missing machines?” The silence that followed roared.

A tiny charge skittered between their boots and hiccuped a pulse of light, and both men moved without thinking, the reflex born from alleys and training and foolish luck survived. The blast was more sound than force, a percussion grenade designed to shake aim loose, and it did its job, ringing Xavier’s ears until their own heartbeats replaced the world. The smoke gusted and curled, unveiling three yards of aisle like a stagehand’s mistake, then sealing it again in the next breath. “Left,” Xavier hissed, not loud but certain, mapping the last scrape of leather to the path between two pallets. Adrian pivoted so their spines found each other again, gun sweeping low to catch a knee, a shin, a stumble that would tell them more than a shadow ever could. “Walk away, Bruce,” Xavier tried one last time, the words hammered flat and steady. “Bring me a timeline and a name, and I’ll run it for you until it breaks or it holds.” The smoke swallowed his offer and left only the cold taste of tin on his tongue.

“Walk away?” Bruce echoed, and now the voice was close enough that Xavier could hear the tremor that anger gives a man who hasn’t slept. “You and your friends made my life a circle with no center, and you want me to stroll?” A mannequin to their right exploded into splinters under a baton strike that came out of nowhere, and the fragments pattered against Xavier’s coat like dry rain. “Every time I reach for the night that matters, the memory snaps like rotten line,” Bruce said, and the confession sounded dragged out of him by barbed hooks. “You’re going to untie that knot, engineer, or I’ll stitch a new one in your hide.” Adrian’s reply was a bark of scorn he barely caged. “You want a knot cut, stop swinging in the dark and name the blade,” he shot back, shifting his weight to bait a swing and catch the follow-through. The warehouse groaned as if the trusses themselves disapproved, and the lights flickered to a dim heartbeat.

They stood their ground in the churn and drift of the smoke, listening for that one wrong breath, that one impatient footfall, that single thread of sound that would give Bruce a shape they could hit. Heat from the small blasts still rippled through the lower air, making the silhouettes waver like specters over coals. Xavier measured the space between the nearest pallets and the next stack of crates, calculating angles as if numbers could be armor. The mannequins’ blank faces watched from their hoods, and the whole place smelled like a church after a fire—the incense gone sour, the wax melted into the floor. Somewhere at the far end of the warehouse, a door hinge murmured, and the draft teased the smoke into new rivers that parted and closed. “We end this clean if you want it clean,” Xavier said into the gray, each word a notch on the ratchet. “We bleed for it if you demand it.” Adrian’s hand brushed his elbow—ready—and both muzzles rose a fraction as the next whisper of motion came, as soft and certain as the edge of a knife.

Arthur murmured to Adrian, “Did you hear that door opening somewhere?” The smoke dragged along the floor in gray rivers, and the mannequins made a forest of hoods that turned every whisper into a trick. Before Adrian could answer, a voice rang out, close enough to scrape the rafters. “Adrian? Arthur? Are you both here?” Pierre, the new recruit, carried himself on that raw edge of eagerness and fear, and his tone bounced around the warehouse like a thrown nail. Arthur swore under his breath, the word bitter as gun oil on his tongue, because shouting

names in a trap was like lighting a flare in a powder room. They held their breath for a beat, bodies pressed back to back, measuring the silence with the discipline you learn in alleys and bad rooms. What came next wasn't silence at all but the messy punctuation of panic.

There was the scuffle of boots, a grunt, Pierre's voice pitched high into a torn scream that made Arthur's jaw knot. Three gunshots cracked in quick succession—one high, one wide, one chewing only splinters from a pallet—and then the sound dropped out like a cable cut. "Kid!" Adrian barked, the word ripping out of him as he surged toward the noise, shouldering through a row of robes that toppled with hollow clacks. Arthur followed hard on his heels, lungs hauling the sour smoke, eyes tracking by the flash-burnt afterimages of those shots. Near the service door they found Pierre on his side, unconscious, his pistol spun away to glint against a stain of oil. One eye was already purpled, swelling shut in a tide of bruise, and a smear of blood ran from his hairline like a string. Arthur's hands were on the boy in an instant, checking the pulse at the throat, counting the beats with a mechanic's patience while the world breathed harsh around them. Adrian crouched on the other side, his wounded shoulder clenched hard under the scarf, breath hissing between his teeth as he reached for the kid's fallen gun.

The impact came behind them like a hammer finding its mark, a blunt, wet crack that folded Adrian sideways before the thought could even form. Bruce had ghosted in out of the mannequins and smoke, delivered a deadly blow with something short and heavy, and vanished again as if the dark itself had tucked him away. Arthur spun and fired on instinct, two, three, four rounds snapping into the gray, each one answered only by the thunk of wood and the angry spark of ricochet. He kept shooting until the cylinder went light and the trigger gave him that empty click that sounds like judgment. Bruce's anger came back through the haze as a living thing, breath raked over wire and words hammered flat. "Don't lie to me! Someone's pulling the strings, and I'm going to find out who. You better hope your friends at the Cyphers don't interfere again." Arthur turned his body to shield both the boy and the fallen partner, mind already mapping exits while his hands checked the weight of an empty gun.

He kept his voice level, pragmatic iron laid over raw nerves, because reason sometimes slips past rage where threats never do. "If they're after you too, maybe we should team up," he said, words clean and deliberate in the smoke. "We both want answers. Working together might help us find out who's really behind all this." From somewhere beyond a rack of tarps came Bruce's low laugh, too tight around the edges, as if it hurt him to make the sound. "You offering me partnership or penance, Xavier?" he asked, and the question dragged like chain over stone. Arthur risked a glance at Adrian—still breathing, slack but alive—and let the math settle in his gut with the weight of a decision. "I'm offering results," he said, letting the word hang like a hook while his eyes followed a draft that said someone had just shifted left.

The conversation reached that brittle peak where one wrong syllable breaks the glass, and Arthur caught the tiniest clatter of metal to his right as Bruce's attention twitched for half a heartbeat. He moved on that flicker, grabbing Pierre by the collar to drag him a foot clear, then darting for the open service door that bled cool night into the heat of the warehouse. Boards thudded under his boots, mannequins swung and knocked shoulders like hostile parishioners, and a baton hissed past his ear close enough to nick hair. He slipped through the doorway and into the alley's wet dark, the fog outside tasting cleaner than the smoke and the night air full of rope, tar, and distant river metal. Behind him Bruce's frustrated shout tore after him, fury and promise braided tight. "This isn't over, Xavier!" the echo bounced off brick and corrugated tin, rode the alley to the street like a curse that knew his name. "I'll find out what you know, one way or another!" Arthur ran two turns hard, then cut his pace to a controlled stride, ears tuned to pursuit and eyes reporting doorways, ladders, and lines like a map unfolding under his feet.

When he judged himself far enough from the warehouse's mouth to breathe without gifting his lungs back to the smoke, he ducked into the lee of a loading dock and pulled the flare gun from

inside his coat. The metal was cold and certain in his palm, the spring stiff from neglect, and he tilted it to the sky where the fog made a low ceiling of tarnished pewter. He pointed it up and fired, the red-gold streak punching through the mist like a wound and then hanging there, dripping sparks, the Cyphers' silent SOS written on cloud. For a heartbeat he let himself believe the calculus had come out even—that the signal would pull the others in, that Adrian would be hauled up and Pierre patched and Bruce cooled by the fact of other eyes. The air behind him dimpled a second too late, a pressure he felt through coat and bone more than heard, and then something blunt and heavy kissed the back of his skull with murderous affection. Light snapped sideways into a narrow band, sound poured through a straw, and the dock bucked under his knees as the world tilted away like a dropped tray. He tasted iron and cordite and the old wood stink of the dock, and he tried to lift a hand that suddenly weighed more than the rest of him. Darkness arrived on soft feet and took him whole, and the last thing that lingered was the flare's glow painting the fog red like a promise he hoped someone would keep.

Arthur was sitting down in his favorite chair in the house. The snug living room was warmed by the smell of brewed coffee and candle wax, shelves lined with old tomes and stoppered glass vials glowing faintly blue like captured fragments of starlight. On the wall behind his shoulder hung a cobbled map of Doskvol, patched together from scraps of parchment and inked with frantic corrections, like a cartographer had been at war with the very city itself. A simple wooden chair creaked under his weight, its rough edges smoothed by years of use, and a woven rug, frayed at the ends, lay across the floor with quiet dignity, speaking of a family's humble Nightmarket home near Gaddwick Station. The sound of soft footsteps brushed across the boards, and then she appeared—cloaked, serene, her face pale in the firelight with dark hair framing sharp features. Her dark eyes held the kind of calm that unnerves men of action, and from her hand curled faint blue wisps of spirit smoke, drifting lazily upward as though they longed for the candlelight. She placed the steaming cup of coffee in his hand with practiced grace, the heat bleeding into his palms as though she was passing part of herself into him.

Arthur could not remember how he had arrived here, and the thought passed over him like smoke too thin to matter. He didn't care. All he cared about was the feeling of being exactly where he belonged, the old chair holding him steady, the faint hum of the vials in their cases, and the damn headache pounding like gears inside his skull. He raised the cup and let the steam brush against his face, heavy with the bitterness of ground beans, even though no comforting taste reached his tongue. The silence stretched comfortably until her voice broke it, warm and friendly, like a companion easing into conversation by a fire. "So you survived, huh?" she said, the words rolling out with an almost teasing ease, her lips curled into something between amusement and quiet pride. Arthur furrowed his brow, confusion tugging against his composure, but he answered all the same. "Yeah, I guess. Where are the girls?" His gaze darted around the room, as if expecting them to step out from the shadows or from behind the map itself.

The woman—Isadora, the name rolled into his thoughts like a whisper from memory—answered with simple certainty, her tone smoothing the edges of his doubt. "They will be here. Don't worry about them. They are strong." Her words were steady, and the way she said them pressed into Arthur's bones like a truth he couldn't shake, though he didn't know why. He lifted the cup again, letting the lukewarm liquid touch his tongue, though it gave him no comfort and no taste. He didn't find this strange—not yet. The headache throbbed louder, the rug felt a little too far from his boots, the map seemed to shimmer faintly with movement, and still he pressed on, speaking with the conviction of a man who knew his duty even through the fog. "I should be out there protecting them. Not in here." The words dragged out of him like chains clattering in a silent room, heavier than he intended, but truer than any dream could shape.

Isadora smiled at him, and the softness of it was undone by the glint of sarcasm that sharpened her eyes. Her hand drifted upward, spirit smoke curling like veins of pale fire from her fingers, ghosts watching from the wisps like faint faces pressed into fog. She tilted her head slightly, amused by his insistence, and then said, her voice cutting playfully but with an edge of finality, “Well, what are you waiting for? Wake up then.” The words landed too sharp, too clear, as if the very sound of them unraveled the weave of the room itself. Arthur blinked hard, the image of her face lingering too long, shadows quivering in the corners, the walls leaning closer like the house itself had been a lie all along.

Arthur’s lips parted, and only a low, rough “What?” escaped, cracked and disbelieving, barely audible against the silence that had grown thicker. His head tilted forward, and the world shifted like a curtain being drawn back, the edges of reality peeling away under Isadora’s faint smile. His eyes dragged open, heavy with the weight of whatever had just passed, and the dream fell from him like ash scattering in the wind. He was no longer in the chair, no longer in the snug room of maps and vials and spirit smoke. He was back in the belly of Lannic’s Tech Emporium, the walls humming with gears, pipes, and electroplasmic current. A hastily improvised cot groaned under his weight as he pushed himself upright, the rough blanket sliding from his chest.

His breathing steadied as he scanned the dim room, and relief struck him with enough force to ease the iron grip of the headache. Adrian was there, bandaged but breathing, slouched in another chair with the stubborn rest of a man refusing to let injury keep him down. Pierre was beside him, laid out but conscious, his bruised eye swollen like a plum yet alive, his chest rising and falling in shallow rhythm. Arthur’s jaw loosened, and he exhaled a long breath he hadn’t realized he had been holding. His last memory bled back into him in jagged flashes—the smoke, the blow, the flare arcing red-gold into the fog. Help had arrived, and the signal had not gone unanswered. He sat there for a moment longer, one hand on his temple, the other gripping the edge of the cot, letting it all piece itself together. He had survived, they had survived, and Doskvol’s shadows had given him back his people—for now.

Lannic came into the room, his heavy boots sounding against the iron floor with the weight of someone who carried both command and concern. He stopped just past the doorway, his scarred face catching the dim glow of the overhead lamp, and let out a low exhale when his good eye fell on Arthur sitting upright on the cot. The faintest smile crept across his ruined features, one only those who knew him well would recognize. “Welcome back, sleeping beauty,” he said, his gravelly voice carrying a humor so rare it almost startled Arthur more than the ambush itself. Arthur let the corner of his mouth curve into a tired grin, one hand brushing against the bandage at his temple as he lifted his gaze. “What did I miss?” he asked, the question slipping out in the dry, sardonic tone that was his way of keeping the weight of the world at arm’s length. For a moment, it felt like two old friends finding each other again in a place that didn’t leave much room for friendship.

Lannic crossed the room in slow strides, the brass finger of his mechanical hand clicking softly against his palm as he approached, each step deliberate as though he were carrying an unspoken apology with him. He reached the table at Arthur’s side and leaned on it, his good eye studying him with the precision of a man measuring damage done. “You missed very little, and too much all at once,” he muttered, his voice dropping to something more somber now. “We found you bloodied, unconscious, and nearly lost to Bruce’s madness. If we had arrived a minute later, I’m not sure I’d be standing here saying this.” Arthur’s brow tightened, the weight of the words digging in, but he answered with steady calm. “You didn’t put me in that warehouse, Lannic. You gave me information, nothing more. The trap was his, and this was the consequence of another crew’s recklessness. Don’t carry blame that doesn’t belong to you.” His voice was firm, laced with both exhaustion and conviction, his words cutting through the room like tempered steel.

Lannic lowered his gaze for a moment, his brass finger ticking against the wood of the table as if to mark the seconds between them. “Still,” he said, his voice heavy, “I sent you there knowing the risk. It was my call to move on that intelligence. I should have seen how wrong the location felt, how off the entire setup was. It should have been me in that warehouse, not you lying half-dead on that cot.” Arthur leaned forward slightly, his elbows pressing into his knees, his eyes fixed on Lannic with the intensity of someone who had crawled through fire and come out the other side unwilling to let the wrong man bear the weight. “Listen to me. That wasn’t your fault. Bruce was after me, after us, long before that night. You could not have predicted his obsession. And as for the others? That new crew has made enemies faster than any of us could track. This was always going to spill into someone else’s blood eventually. It just happened to be mine.”

Lannic’s jaw tightened, the scars along his face pulling taut as he listened. He exhaled long through his nose, then finally nodded, though the faint regret still lingered in the hard line of his mouth. “You’re stubborn as ever,” he said, a faint growl of humor breaking through his tone, “but I hear you. That doesn’t mean I’ll forgive myself for not pulling you out sooner.” He leaned closer, lowering his voice until it carried the weight of command again. “And don’t think for a second I’ll let you throw yourself back into this investigation right away. You’re not moving until you’ve healed, not one step. This isn’t a request, Arthur. Consider it an order.” The words dropped like stones, final and immovable, as though he thought sheer authority might bind Arthur to the cot better than any bandage could.

Arthur smirked faintly at that, leaning back against the pillow with deliberate ease, his hand tightening around the cup of water at his side as if savoring the challenge hidden in the words. “An order, is it?” he said, his voice low and amused, the exhaustion never quite able to bury the defiance in his tone. “You know as well as I do that kind of talk doesn’t work on me, Lannic. It never has.” He lifted his gaze again, locking eyes with the man across from him, and let the silence stretch, both of them caught in the unspoken truth that Arthur would never be the kind to wait patiently while others played their pieces on the board. Finally, the faintest grin tugged at Lannic’s scarred face, and Arthur mirrored it with one of his own. The weight of orders and counter-orders meant little here; they both knew the rhythm too well, two men bound by trust and stubbornness alike, and that was the closest either of them would come to agreement.

Chapter 4: **The Silent Meeting**

The underground workshop breathed like a sleeping engine, warm air exhaled through copper ribs and bolt-studded vents, the ceiling sweat-beaded where cold stone met steam, and in the middle of it Arthur stood with a chipped mug cooling in his hand and his stare pinned to the slate wall as if glare alone could loosen a secret. The board was a battlefield of chalk and string and thumbtacks hammered flat by repetition: scuffs where his palm had erased yesterday's certainty, bright fresh lines where today's doubt insisted on re-drawing the same shapes until they behaved. Lamps threw a thin, industrial twilight across the slate, turning dust motes into glittering filings suspended in a magnetic field, and the coffee smelled burnt and patient, a dark anchor he kept lifting to his mouth and forgetting to drink. Lannic had told him to rest, to let the gears cool before they seized, but rest belonged to men who could unclench their teeth; Arthur's jaw had learned the opposite lesson years ago. He shifted the mug from one hand to the other, the heat a low reminder of blood still moving, and studied the center like a machinist sights a bearing—there, the heart, the shape that refused to stop being the problem. His knuckles were smudged with chalk like frost, his nails black-rimmed with oil, and the hum in the room threaded through his ribs until he felt tuned to it. He had not come to change anything tonight; he had come to see if anything changed without him. Sometimes the board whispered when you were quiet enough to hear it; sometimes it only sharpened the silence into a blade.

Dominating the slate was the ovoid—the not-quite-egg that had lived in his hands as shards and now lived here as a single, ugly grace note—drawn heavy at the outline so the white line bit the gray and refused to fade. Vents scalloped its flanks where he'd crosshatched them, teeth of dispersion that broke the curve into measured mouths, each one labeled with a number and a timing note, little ticks like metronome marks: 0.7 sec—0.9 sec—staggered arc. Beneath the sketch he'd scrawled in block letters, irritated even at his own caution: EGG SHAPE?—the question mark gouged harder than the rest, as if the chalk had been a chisel and the doubt something he could carve into the board's bone. Around the egg he'd built a corona of fragments taped in place, photographs of warped casing, a coil snapped at the throat, a smear of residue dark as baked sugar; arrows pointed back into the drawing where each piece used to belong, the way a mortician points to scars that ruined a face. In the margin he'd written FIRE and then GAS and then drawn a line through both, heavy, punishing strokes that ghosted onto the adjacent tiles, and circled DISPERSION? so many times the circle had become an orbit. He could smell the metal even now, ghosted into his fingertips: scorched plating, bitter zinc, a touch of acetone, the memory of heat kissing hair off the back of his hand. The egg wasn't a question to him anymore; the mark on the slate was to remind him that naming a shape wasn't the same as proving its manners. Spectacle was a crowd-pleaser; this thing wanted a room.

On the right-hand pane he'd built the ledger of people—names arranged like a simple machine, not because men were simple but because their power traveled along predictable shafts if you found the bearings. Emberlash = BUILDER sat in blunt white, underlined once; beneath it: Circle = delivery mechanism (zealots, loyal footsoldiers), the parenthetical smaller, almost contempt written in script. Across from them was an empty square he refused to fill with anything but a title—PATRON = UNKNOWN HAND BEHIND THE CURTAIN—boxed twice, the corners nicked from where he'd pressed too hard, chalk dust feathering like ash. Between the builder and the faceless buyer sat a name that had begun as a rumor and graduated to a hinge: ELIAS WREN—antiquities dealer, arts of coin, social rot—drawn with neat letters and a short spine of bullet notes beneath. A chalk arrow ran from Patron down to Wren, then another from Wren to Circle, then a third back to the egg—a triangle of blame that looked uglier every hour he stared at it, not because it was wrong but because it was beginning to look right. Under Wren's name he'd written the question that itched like a healing burn: If Wren touches coin before anyone else, who hands it to him first? and boxed that too, as if caging it would keep it from chewing at

the rest. Elias as hinge, Elias as laundromat for sins, Elias whose showroom smell of beeswax and old paper hid the reek of furnace-cut alloys; the thought made his teeth find each other until the muscle in his jaw fluttered.

Below the board, on a steel table scored with a hundred old arguments, lay the physical proof that kept him honest when theories wanted to lie: a crate lid pried off and turned into a tray, lined with oil paper and glassine envelopes, each tagged with white string and a blocky hand. Warped casing segment—thread pitch non-standard; Vent fin (bent)—stress smear on inner face; Ignition coil (fractured)—carbonized lacquer; Residue, seam—black, tarry, faint solvent note; Shrapnel angle map—cone vs ring comparison (ring favored). Next to the tray, his micrometer waited with its spindle open like a mouth about to bite, and a jeweler's loupe sat upside down in a shallow dish of alcohol, the lens catching the lamp and throwing a mean little comet onto the ceiling. He had swabbed the residue three times and each time the smell suggested fuel and the burn pattern argued dispersal; he kept the stained cotton in a bottle because sometimes your own nose learned something on the fourth pass. A rag hung over the chairback where he'd wiped blood from his glove after the canal—faded now to rust—and even that thread worked its way into the board's geometry, a reminder that answers took a price and the city tallied in bodies when coin felt vulgar. He didn't touch any of it; he just cataloged it again with his eyes, the way you count bolts by feel in a dark pocket for the comfort of knowing they're still there.

Pinned to the left of the slate, like a bruise bleeding into the corner of his vision, the Blade Chronicle headline glared with its cheap ink and its appetite for dread: HORROR RETURNS TO DOSKVOL—underlined twice by his own hand hard enough to tear the pulp, the paper puckered along the red strokes of pencil. The article's columns had gone soft where his thumb kept finding the same paragraph and pressing without reading it, the way you worry a tooth that aches because the ache insists. Merrow Valesque lived in that corner now like mold, a stink you couldn't scrub, his name a fuse you could hear hissing even when the room was quiet. The placement wasn't an accident; he'd put the headline in his peripheral so the city's larger fever wouldn't slip out of the room while he mapped another infection. If the eggs were instruments, who composed the piece and to what rhythm, and wasn't Merrow fond of performances that made streets into stages and people into chorus? No—this weapon didn't sing like him; Merrow preferred laughter in the flames, not thermostats on hell. Still, the underlines stayed because sometimes the wrong question reminded you not to get comfortable with the right one. Control versus spectacle—someone somewhere wanted the former and knew the latter would be blamed for it.

He drank at last and found the coffee cold, a flat bitterness that made the back of his tongue prickle, and he welcomed it because sensation meant he was still in a body, not just a mind pacing ruts into stone. Lannic's order to rest hung in the room like a polite sign no one obeyed, next to the "No Smoking" placard Silas ignored as a matter of identity; Arthur could almost hear the older man's voice saying stand down, and almost hear his own answer which was a nod that never reached his feet. The egg sat there and sat there, a simple problem with monstrous consequences, and he counted its mouths again and imagined them breathing in a cellar under a dining room floor, or under a tram bench, or bolted into a station's ornamental grate where children liked to sit with paper pastries. Emberlash builds, the Circle carries, a patron counts—his chalk had already stripped the romance out of it; now he needed the names to strip the safety. Elias Wren, smiling in a doorway that smelled of polish and old money, palms soft from handling objects other men bled for—who pays you, antiquarian, and how often do you lie to yourself about the difference between auction and armory. If the coin touched Wren first, whose purse breathed before his, and did that purse belong to a cult, a council, a family that called itself something kinder while it gave orders to burn clean. He set the mug on the table and felt the workshop's hum ride his bones again, then let his eyes close for the length of one slow breath, not to rest but to listen for the board's answer. Nothing spoke, which told him everything: the machine was waiting for the next tooth to catch.

Arthur’s silence cracked under the sound of knuckles at the door, not a pattern of politeness or rhythm but that odd, stuttering rap that only Silas used, more like a crow pecking wood than a man asking entrance. Arthur didn’t turn; his eyes stayed on the board, coffee balanced in his hand, the black line of thought as stubborn as coal seam. “Come in,” he said at last, voice flat. The hinges moaned as Silas stepped through, slow and unhurried as always, the weight of him shifting with each boot scrape against the stone floor. He looked from Arthur, hunched and still before the chalkboard, to the mug cooling in his grip, then finally to the white-scrawled tangle of lines and fragments. “Again over here?” he asked, a question shaded with something between irritation and worry, though Arthur gave no reply. His eyes tracked the egg’s outline as if patience alone would force the thing to betray itself, his jaw tight and his breathing shallow, like a man in a staring contest with his own ghosts. The lamp hissed behind them, and the steam pipe rattled once like it was tired of keeping secrets.

Silas, used to carrying one side of the conversation when Arthur slipped too deep into thought, leaned against the doorframe with a small exhale. “I have someone you might wanna see,” he said at last, casual but not without weight. Arthur’s lips pulled into the faintest ghost of humor, his voice dry when he murmured, “Is she pretty?” The line broke some of the heaviness in the room, and Silas answered it with a laugh, short and warm, one of those rare sounds from a man who didn’t laugh often. “Yeah, actually,” he said, pushing off the frame. “But you’ll never guess what name she came saying.” His words hung in the damp air, but Arthur gave him nothing—no quip, no shrug, not even the courtesy of an eyebrow raised in curiosity. He just kept staring at the board, gaze fixed on the place where the chalk had pressed too hard and fractured, as though the crack itself might be an answer.

The silence stretched, long enough to be deliberate, long enough to test patience. Silas, waiting for the bait to land, finally tipped his hand. “She’s been asking for one of the Cyphers. Asking questions about this merchant, Elias Wren.” At that name the tension in Arthur’s shoulders shifted like gears engaging, subtle but undeniable. His hand stilled on the mug, and his head turned fraction by fraction, until at last he looked at Silas with both eyes sharpened, his mask of detachment cracked by interest. The name Elias Wren cut through his stillness the way a rasp draws sparks from steel, and for the first time that night he wasn’t looking at the board but at the man across from him.

Arthur drained the last of the coffee, its dregs bitter and cold, and set the mug down with care on the cluttered workbench. He rose without hurry, but there was intent in every movement, the coiled kind of energy that came when obsession found new oxygen. He made a small gesture with two fingers, signaling Silas to lead the way, a wordless demand to take him where this trail pointed. But Silas only shook his head with a half-smile, eyes narrowing slightly as if to temper Arthur’s sudden fire. “She’s not here right now,” he said, tone even. “Just left. But she left an address. Somewhere to meet anyone willing to talk.”

From his coat Silas drew a folded scrap of paper, edges soft with damp and handling, and passed it to Arthur. For a long second Arthur didn’t take it, letting it dangle between them, his gaze fixed not on Silas but on the paper itself, as though the answer might bleed through the crease before it touched his hand. Then he reached out, slow, fingers brushing the parchment with a deliberate care that looked more like ritual than habit, and slipped it open just enough to see the ink of the address within. The letters swam for a second under his tired eyes, but the name Elias burned behind them like coal still glowing in the ash.

Silas didn’t linger, didn’t press further. He left with the same slow steps he had entered with, his shadow long against the stone, until the door closed with a sigh and Arthur was alone again with the chalk and the cold coffee and the relentless hum of the Emporium’s veins. He held the folded paper between his fingers, tapping it once against the rim of the mug, mind moving in circles as tight as the chalk lines on the slate. Coincidence was not a word he trusted; not when

the same names echoed from canal interrogations, from burned wreckage, from whispered streets, and now from a stranger's lips carried in by Silas. Elias Wren, again. Always Elias Wren.

Arthur stared at the address, jaw flexing as he weighed it in silence, then glanced back at the board where the hinge between Patron and Circle was drawn in chalk with Wren's name bridging the gap. He thought of the question scrawled there: If Wren touches coin before anyone else, who hands it to him first? Now another question pressed itself into the margin of his mind—who was this woman, and what did she know of that hinge? He folded the paper once more, tight, and slipped it into his coat pocket, the gesture slow and deliberate. The workshop seemed to exhale as he did, the lamps flickering once, the pipes knocking like a quiet agreement. This was no accident. This was the next tooth in the gear catching, and Arthur would follow it wherever it turned.

Arthur turned the corner into the street marked on the paper, the ink still faintly smudged from where his thumb had lingered too long on the fold. He checked it once more under the jaundiced glow of a gaslamp, reading the scrawl of instruction like a riddle: *down the narrow alley. sun down. I will be the only brave or stupid out there at that time.* The corner of his mouth twitched upward into a crooked smile. It had the kind of blunt confidence that reminded him of men who'd survived too many close scrapes, or women who knew exactly how sharp their own edge was. He slipped into the alley, boots whispering over cobblestone slick with damp, and there she was exactly as promised. A woman sat perched atop an overturned bin, one leg drawn up as if the position had been claimed hours ago, blade in her hands catching the dying light as she polished it with a piece of worn cloth. The way she tried to look casual betrayed nothing but the fact she was dangerous; it was the ease of someone who'd grown used to hiding her claws in plain sight.

She looked up at him as he closed the distance, dark hair spilling around her shoulders, the cut of her cloak deep enough to swallow most of her frame. The lamplight drew faint lines along the leather of her coat, a deep crimson darkened further by the alley's shadows, and for an instant Arthur thought of dried blood that never quite washed away. Her hands glimmered faintly where they held the blade, not with polish or oil, but with the subtle shimmer of something more unnatural—a whisper of energy coiling under her skin like smoke that had learned to obey. Her eyes were sharper than the knife she cleaned, steady and unflinching, the gaze of a woman who catalogued every motion, every breath, the way a thief counts exits in a crowded room. She didn't flinch when he spoke, just arched one brow at him, tone dry as fog-damp stone. "Don't you think it's too late to be out in a shady place like this, miss?"

Her answer came quick, a deflection sharpened into banter. "Don't you think it's too late for a guy like you to be out here?" Her smirk was there and gone in a breath, replaced by the cool mask of someone who knew the game wasn't about charm but leverage. Arthur didn't indulge the tease; he wasn't here to play cards with words, not yet. He tipped his head instead, voice flat and precise as a name scratched into steel. "Arthur Xavier. A friend of the Cyphers." He let the word *friend* hang, an anchor and a warning both. She met his tone with one just as steady, a small nod as though the introduction had been expected. "Syloki," she said simply, the syllables hard-edged, no wasted frill. "Private investigator."

The alley seemed to draw closer around them as the exchange settled, smoke from some unseen chimney spilling low across the cobblestones, turning every step of air into something tasted more than breathed. Arthur leaned slightly against the brick wall, watching her movements with the same careful detachment he reserved for volatile chemicals. She, in turn, let her blade rest across her lap, cloth folded neatly over it, and narrowed her eyes. "I'm looking into a man," she began, her voice quiet but edged with purpose. "Elias Wren. Antiquities dealer.

His name's been circling in places it shouldn't. I've been told the Cyphers might have a thread worth pulling."

Arthur didn't answer at once. The name pulled taut against the thoughts he'd been gnawing on for weeks, the chalk marks and scribbled questions on his board in the Emporium's bowels. But here, in the alley's chill, he forced himself into a mask of careful indifference. "Wren's a name people in our city know," he said slowly, tone measured. "Antiquities trade. Deals in things with age, sometimes with power. His coin's clean enough for the market stalls, but it's touched dirt on the way there." He shrugged lightly, as if the statement was little more than gossip overheard on a tram, though his gaze didn't leave hers.

She tilted her head, studying him, as if weighing whether his words carried truth or only smoke. "Touched dirt," she repeated, lips curling around the phrase. "That's one way to say it. You believe he launders more than just antiques?" Arthur gave the smallest twitch of a smile, sharp and humorless. "Belief's a dangerous word. But let's say orders pass through him. Payments too. He's a hinge. Someone leans on him, the door opens for others." He let the words come clipped, carefully stripped of anything that could be mistaken for confession, yet enough to suggest he wasn't dismissing her search.

The alley's damp cold pressed against them, and for a long moment the only sound was the drip of water from a gutter pipe and the faint rasp of cloth against her knife. Syloki studied him in silence, her eyes narrowed, as if she were listening for the lie he hadn't spoken, for the thread he'd left dangling on purpose. "If you know that much," she said finally, her voice low, almost conversational, "you must know whose hand pushes the door in the first place." Arthur's gaze hardened, not with anger but with the weight of a man who'd learned when to stop short of truth. "If I knew that," he said, his tone a flat blade of honesty wrapped in steel, "I wouldn't be standing in an alley trading words with someone I just met."

The smirk flickered again at the corner of her lips, but it didn't reach her eyes. She nodded once, as if to say she hadn't expected more but had gotten enough. "Fair," she said, slipping the knife back into its sheath with a soft scrape. "Then I'll keep pulling, and maybe our paths cross again." The faint shimmer of energy ghosted her fingers as she adjusted her cloak, the alley shadows bending closer as if they knew her name. Arthur didn't move, only pushed himself off the wall and adjusted his coat, his expression unreadable. "Paths have a way of crossing whether we want them to or not," he said, quiet enough the fog almost stole it away. The tension between them hung like smoke from a fresh spark—two hunters, two questions, and one name tying their threads together: Elias Wren.

The silence between them stretched like a taut wire, the damp alley holding its breath as both weighed the other's presence. Finally, Syloki broke it, her voice low but edged with a careful boldness. "Look, I can tell you know more. If it's coin you want…" The words slipped half-formed, but Arthur's hand rose before she could finish, the gesture steady, deliberate, shutting down her offer with an authority that came from habit. "I'm not interested in your money, Syloki." His tone was firm, without anger, but with the quiet gravity of someone who had long ago decided what kind of debts he would and would not carry. She studied him at length, measuring the man behind the words, her eyes narrowing slightly in the lamplight, the weight of his refusal settling deeper than she wanted it to.

Her smirk came quick but did not last, an echo of habit more than humor. "I can pay if you need," she pressed, her tone attempting lightness, but the strain beneath it betrayed more truth than the casual mask could cover. She shifted slightly on the overturned bin, the leather of her coat creaking as she leaned forward, voice sharper now, as though the confession had slipped out despite her best efforts. "Regardless. I'm new in Doskvol. I'm here following another lead of a man I'm searching. But it dies with this guy called Elias Wren. And I already learned that he

ain’t easy to reach.” She tried to make the words sound like banter, a shrug of indifference, but Arthur caught the subtle fissure underneath—she had already tried, already hit the wall Elias Wren was built behind. He let the silence spool out, watching her with that steady gaze that always seemed to press too deep, waiting.

Her hand dipped into the fold of her coat, producing a scrap of paper that looked like it had passed too many times between damp fingers and hidden pockets. She held it out toward him with a flat palm, the writing catching in the dim light. Arthur took it with a quiet seriousness, smoothing the fold open to read. The letters leapt out at him, stark and unpolished: *Urgent Intel: Artefact Exchange – Elias Wren involved. Cyphers & Circle. Meet for details.* No other names, no neat signature, only a single letter scrawled at the bottom, jagged and hurried, *M.* His eyes lingered there, on the crude weight of that letter, his brow furrowed in thought. Syloki’s voice followed, clipped but steady, filling the silence that stretched as he stared at the page. “This was left for me, anonymously. I don’t know who sent it, or even who this Mister M is. But I need Elias.”

Arthur read the words again, slowly, his lips shaping them in a low murmur, then again once more, aloud this time, the sound of them weighted differently when spoken into the cold air. The repetition was not for her but for himself, each pass sharpening the edges of meaning, tugging at the threads of connections that tangled in his mind. He read it three times before lowering the paper, still holding it carefully between his fingers like evidence from a crime scene. Syloki’s sharp gaze followed every shift of his eyes, noting his interest, noting the way his silence pressed heavier with each breath. “You know something,” she said finally, voice sharpened by instinct. “Tell me, Xavier. What do you know about Elias Wren?”

He didn’t answer straight away, the pause almost deliberate, his thumb brushing the worn edge of the note as if the texture might give him clarity. Then, at last, he exhaled through his nose, a quiet, steady sound. “Do you want some help with this mission?” The words were simple, but the weight behind them was anything but. Syloki’s eyes flickered, surprise hidden under a quick tilt of her head as she crossed her arms across her chest. Her tone came quick, defensive, as though instinct forced the denial. “I don’t need your help.”

Arthur’s gaze didn’t waver, his tone remaining as calm and flat as stone, but with a quiet iron that settled deep into the alley’s damp air. “I’m not offering because I think you need it,” he said, words deliberate, each syllable slow enough to cut through the smoke. “I’m offering because our goals align. And I’d rather not have to follow you from a distance.” The way he said it carried no hint of jest, only a pragmatic truth. Two predators circling the same prey, better served shoulder to shoulder than snapping at each other’s heels.

The two of them lingered in silence again, the sound of dripping water marking the rhythm of their thoughts. Syloki’s eyes narrowed slightly, lips pursed, weighing him as though he were another cipher, another locked box whose worth could not be known until opened. Arthur stood steady, still holding the note, the faint shimmer of lamplight glinting off his coat buttons. For a moment it was nothing but the two of them and the fog pressing in, each measuring, each testing, each trying to decide if the other was blade or shield. The paper in his hand seemed to pulse with importance, and the crude *M* at the bottom lingered like a shadow between them, daring them both to step into a path neither could walk alone.

“Elias Wren…” Arthur’s voice carried in a low murmur, rough around the edges as though the name itself tasted sour on his tongue. His brow furrowed, lines etching deeper as his mind wound through the possibilities, each darker than the last. “He’s been showing up in the strangest places lately. Quiet dealings, half-hidden exchanges, threads that don’t line up clean. It looks like he’s involved in something far beyond his usual front of books and trinkets.” His eyes narrowed, glinting faintly in the dim alley light, the sharp focus of a man used to

assembling fragments into weapons. “If Elias is involved, it means the artefact in question must be of significant value or power. He’s no zealot. He launders. And the Cyphers and the Ember Circle don’t typically mix without a reason. We are at war since, well, a long time.” The way he said it held no heat, only the weariness of someone who’d counted too many scars from that war already.

Syloki listened with a stillness that felt heavier than silence, her gaze wandering along the slick brick walls as if they too might whisper secrets. The faint glow of a lamp behind her cast her face half in shadow, half in challenge. “We need to act swiftly,” she said at last, her voice holding the quiet certainty of someone who had already decided her course. “Do you have a plan?” Her tone was careful but probing, as though testing his edge, weighing whether he was a man who relied on brute push or sharp precision.

Arthur straightened slightly, his jaw set, his demeanor resolute in that way that never came with bravado, only with habit. “We need precision and stealth,” he said, the words falling like the arrangement of tools before a job. “Let’s stake out the rendezvous point and observe. Keep quiet, eyes first, blades later. We can make our move once we have enough information on how the exchange is to be conducted.” The note of command in his voice wasn’t aimed at her—it was the way he spoke to himself, to the space, to the problem that needed solving. He thought in patterns, never in gambles.

But Syloki’s eyes, bright and unflinching, met his with something more alive, more reckless. “Sounds like a plan,” she said, letting the words carry a wry twist, the hint of a grin ghosting her lips. Then she leaned back slightly on her heel, her head tilting just enough to give away her play. “Let’s get moving.”

Arthur blinked, confusion slicing through his steady mask. “Get moving?” he echoed, suspicion lacing his tone, the beginnings of a frown tugging at his mouth. Syloki only smiled wider, the streetlight catching in her eyes as if she had been waiting for this moment of revelation. “The meeting is tonight,” she said, casual as if she were naming the weather. “Actually not long from now. I thought you wanted to get involved, no?” The question was edged in jest, but beneath it lay a deliberate challenge, a dare aimed squarely at the part of him that could never turn away from the scent of answers.

Arthur’s thoughts snarled against themselves, heavy with suspicion. This was impulsive, reckless, a move set too fast. What kind of game was she playing? He had thought this was a conversation, a feeling out of intentions, boundaries, allegiances. But no—she had brought him here on the edge of action. Did she just recruit him without his knowing? No, no, not exactly. *I offered help,* he reminded himself, the echo of his own voice sharpening the realization. Still, he didn’t like the weight of being pulled on a leash he hadn’t seen. While these doubts tangled through him, Syloki turned her back with a decisive shift of her cloak, her boots striking the cobblestones in steady rhythm as she started walking away.

She didn’t look back until she had gone a short distance down the alley, then stopped, turned her head, and let a smile curl across her face, bold and taunting in equal measure. “Coming or not?” she asked, the words dangling like bait and challenge both. Arthur exhaled once, quiet and resigned, the air tasting of damp stone and cold iron. He didn’t feel like he had many options, not if he wanted the thread to stay in his hand. So he pushed forward, boots echoing in the hush of the narrow street, and followed. The silence between them shifted as they moved, not comfortable, not yet hostile—something else, something testing. And then, without warning, her voice cut through it, light but edged with curiosity. “So you’re a Cypher, huh? What’s that like?” The question hung in the air like smoke, daring him to show her more than the steel and silence he’d given so far.

Their footsteps carried softly against the uneven cobblestones, each step a muted echo swallowed by the close-pressed walls of Doskvol's winding arteries. The city at night felt less like a place to live and more like a living thing in itself, breathing damp fog from its cracks, whispering low secrets through rusted grates and dripping eaves. Arthur walked with the same measured caution he brought to dismantling unstable machinery, his shoulders slightly hunched beneath the cloak of darkness, every sense bent toward cataloguing each sound. Syloki, by contrast, moved with an alert grace, the faint swish of her long coat brushing stone as if the shadows welcomed her in. They drew near the district of Crow's Foot, where tension never quite died and the streets seemed to wear menace like a second skin, until finally they found themselves crouched before a hollow where secrecy gathered like stagnant water. It was a forgotten lot between leaning brick warehouses, cloaked in murk, where the faintest murmur of hushed voices told of figures cloaked by deeper shadow. The air felt charged, close, like a match about to strike.

Syloki leaned toward Arthur, her voice pitched just above the faint hum of the night, sharp but careful. "Do you recognize any of them?" she asked, her gaze sharp as a hawk's while she scanned the hidden cluster. Arthur pulled the small binoculars from his coat pocket, glass lenses fogging faintly with the damp, and steadied his hands against a wall. He squinted, turning the focus ring with a slow twist, letting the lightless void resolve into grainy movement. He shook his head, a faint frown creasing his brow. "It's… hard to say," he murmured, frustration taut in his tone. "It's very dark in this area. I can't make out anyone that I know really." His voice was flat but measured, the kind of calm that covered irritation with precision.

Syloki's lips quirked into the shadow of a smirk, though her eyes stayed fixed forward. "Any recognizable symbols for the factions?" she teased lightly, her whisper cutting sharp through the air. "Maybe a glowing fire, or a skull with a screw on it, perhaps?" Her attempt at casualness carried the edge of someone poking deliberately, testing him for weakness or humor. Arthur tilted his head toward her, incredulous, lowering the lenses slightly to give her a look sharp enough to cut. "That's not… we have an image, an icon, yes. Nothing close to skulls and screws," he replied dryly, tone laced with clipped annoyance, though his hands returned instantly to his work. Syloki lifted one shoulder in a slow shrug, her grin playing as if she were trying to melt the seriousness. "How would I know? I thought the Cyphers worked with tech." Arthur's answer came in the same flat monotone he used when he'd run out of patience. "We do." The words sat between them like iron dropped on stone, neither invitation nor denial, just truth sharpened to a point.

Time dragged in the silence that followed, filled only by the damp rustle of shifting figures at the meeting and the distant clatter of a chain somewhere further down the district. Both leaned forward, ears straining to catch the whispered fragments, but the words drowned in the fog, indistinct syllables breaking apart before they could reach meaning. Syloki tapped a finger restlessly against her thigh, eyes never leaving the cloaked assembly. "Recognize any Cyphers or no?" she asked again, her tone probing but quieter, softer around the edges. Arthur exhaled, the sound quiet but heavy, and lowered the lenses for a beat to rub his tired eyes. "No, I do not," he answered, voice deliberate and clipped. "Nor anyone I know from the Ember Circle. Are you sure your secret admirer was right?" The question lingered like a blade slipped carefully between them. Syloki tilted her head, gaze narrowing in thought, her lips tightening but refusing him the satisfaction of a response. For a long moment she said nothing, her silence as sharp as her earlier words.

Then, without warning, her voice broke the air again, sudden and firm. "I need to get closer." Arthur's head snapped toward her, his voice low but edged with iron. "What for? It's too dangerous." She gave him a look, half daring, half pragmatic, and leaned close enough that he

could see the faintest glimmer of amusement in her eyes. “I’m pretty good at reading lips,” she explained, tone casual, but the determination beneath it was undeniable. “But I need some light to *see* the lips.” Arthur opened his mouth to argue, to grind reason against recklessness, but before his words could form she was already moving. Her coat shifted like liquid shadow as she began to sneak forward, boots finding the cracks and soft patches where the cobblestones wouldn’t give her away. Arthur muttered a curse under his breath, lowering his binoculars to watch her, torn between dragging her back and letting her burn herself on the flame.

And then it happened. The alley’s fragile silence shattered as a stray cat exploded from behind a nearby crate, startled by Syloki’s advance. Its yowl pierced the night, a shrill, panicked sound that echoed against brick and iron, slicing clean through the tension like a blade. The creature streaked past them in a blur of fur and claws, its tail thrashing as it darted into the open. Had Syloki stepped on it? Startled it with her boot? It didn’t matter. The damage was done. The figures at the meeting froze in their quiet communion, heads snapping up, eyes turning, sharp and probing. Their murmurs died into an instant silence, replaced by the heavy weight of suspicion. Gaslight from a distant lamp caught the turn of their faces, shadows breaking just enough for their eyes to narrow in Arthur and Syloki’s direction. The air itself seemed to thicken, every sound of the night collapsing into the single beat of breath between being unseen and being caught.

The figures in the shadows froze as one, their stillness sharp enough to cut through the fog, their heads turning toward the faint disturbance with eyes narrowed against the gloom. For a heartbeat it was as though time itself held its breath, the silhouettes carved from night like statues. Then, in a gesture too deliberate to be chance, they simply moved apart. One after another they peeled away from the meeting ground with an unnatural casualness, turning their backs and pacing off like strangers who had never exchanged a word, as if dissolving into the city were part of the ritual. It was too neat, too rehearsed, and that alone set Arthur’s teeth on edge. Syloki’s jaw tightened in visible frustration, her body stiffening as though every nerve screamed to give chase. She straightened up from the crouch, pulling her coat close about her, and began walking in their direction with the same studied ease, but her pace carried an edge, her eyes locked to the nearest shape slipping into the labyrinth of alleys.

Arthur saw it in her face before she even moved. The second their quarry’s step quickened, Syloki dropped the act and lunged into motion, her boots slamming against the cobbles as she burst into a sprint. Her coat flared behind her like a banner of shadow as she darted between crates and barrels, cutting through the narrow passage with relentless focus. Arthur let out a sharp curse and took off right behind her, his longer strides eating the distance but still trailing the hunter’s instinct in her movement. The scattered figures vanished into branching streets, breaking like ink spilled into water, but Syloki never hesitated, eyes locked on one retreating back. She darted around a corner with a predator’s certainty, her breath a steady rhythm against the ragged shuffle of their target ahead.

Arthur’s hand dipped instinctively into his pocket, fingers curling around the small golden bird he had carried without much thought, a strange little trinket from his collection of experiments. He couldn’t even recall why he had slipped it into his coat this evening, but in this moment it felt inevitable, as though the night itself had known he would need it. The weight of it was small, deceptively delicate, and yet charged with the potential of the tinkering hours he had poured into it. Without breaking stride, Arthur flicked his wrist and hurled the bird forward, the faint gleam of its gilded feathers catching in the weak lamplight. The instant it left his hand, the mechanism inside came alive—the wings snapped open with a metallic crack, and the toy began to beat the air with frantic precision, propelling itself forward with startling speed.

The golden bird streaked past Syloki in a shimmer of brass and sparks, its wings whirring with a faint metallic shriek. The man ahead turned his head in confusion, perhaps mistaking the sound

for a spirit-echo, but he had no time to puzzle it out. The bird struck him square between the shoulders, its tiny body detonating in a sharp, contained burst of alchemical force. The sound was like the crack of a firecracker in a cavern, small but piercing, the light flaring just long enough to etch the shock into his face. The impact jolted him forward violently, his arms windmilling as he tried to catch his balance, but his boots skidded on the slick cobbles. With a strangled gasp he went down hard, chest slamming against stone, the air leaving him in a guttural groan. The bird's remains skittered and hissed faint smoke before vanishing into stillness.

Syloki didn't waste a single breath. She was on him in an instant, her boots grinding against his legs to pin him, her gloved hands pressing his wrists into the cold, wet stones with a practiced force. Her hair swung loose from her hood, catching the dim light as her face set into hard lines of focus and control. The man bucked once beneath her, but she drove her knee into his spine with enough weight to crush the fight out of him. Arthur came up seconds later, slowing only as he reached them, his chest heaving from the sprint but his eyes locked with grim purpose on the man writhing under Syloki's hold. The city's damp fog curled around them, lit by the faint gaslight from a crooked lamp above, turning the scene into a portrait of hunter and prey. The silence that followed carried only the sound of the man's labored breath, Syloki's low snarl of effort, and Arthur's measured steps closing in, each one heavy with the knowledge that answers were finally within reach.

The man squirmed beneath Syloki's weight, his words spilling out in a frantic rush as he writhed against the stone. "Get off me, you crazy bitch! You've got no right—none of this is mine! You don't know who you're messing with!" His voice cracked with the strain of panic, curses bubbling out with every short breath. "I'm just walking home! I don't even know you freaks! You're both mad, do you hear me? Mad! Let me up before I—before I scream the whole street down on you!" The desperation in his tone was almost comical, undercut by the helplessness of being pinned flat with Syloki's knee pressed firmly into his back. His head twisted on the cobbles, spittle mixing with the grime as he tried to bite out another insult. "You're a lunatic—what kind of woman does this—get your hands off—"

Syloki's patience snapped with sharp efficiency. She dug one hand into her pocket, fingers curling around a crumpled square of cloth, and before the man could twist his head to spit again she shoved the handkerchief between his teeth. His muffled protest turned to a gagged grunt, the sound immediately robbed of any threat. She leaned down close enough for her words to slide into his ear like the edge of a blade, her voice low and mocking. "You can keep that, darling. Probably tastes like snot. Sorry—been a bit sick lately." The captive's eyes widened in disgust, his muffled growl vibrating through the cloth as he tried to shake it loose, but Syloki only pressed it tighter with the heel of her palm, smirking as his struggles grew more desperate.

She tilted her head toward the cobbles, her voice sharp but casual, as though they were discussing the weather. "He dropped that. What's that?" Arthur followed the line of her gaze, the lamplight catching on something dark and square beside the man's flailing arm. He bent down and pulled it toward him, the hinges of the case clicking softly as he snapped it open. Inside lay a mess of carefully folded papers, some already slipping loose, their edges smudged with grease and ash. Arthur's eyes narrowed as he lifted one sheet, the lines of ink and charcoal sketching out a lattice of wires coiled around the shape of a pressurized chamber. Another sheet fluttered half free, revealing the curve of tubing, valves, and a layered diagram of interlocking parts. He ran a thumb along the edges, recognizing the telltale signs of a weapon's blueprint in progress.

Arthur straightened slowly, holding one page to the dim light, his voice taking on the calm, clinical edge of deduction. "It looks like… plans for something. By the layout of the pipes, the way the chamber vents here…" He tapped the page, his brows furrowing as his mind ran

through the logic. “If I had to guess, a propulsion system—no, not propulsion. Dispersion. Small enough to fit into something the size of a football, yet effective enough to choke a room. Whoever designed this wasn’t thinking about fire—they were thinking about reach. About control.” His words hung heavy in the narrow alley, the implications clanging louder than any gunshot.

Syloki’s gaze cut from the blueprints to the man pinned beneath her, her lips curling with skepticism. “Look at him. Is this Elias?” The name carried weight in her tone, sharpened with her need for an answer. Arthur didn’t even glance at the captive, still studying the jagged lines of the schematic with grim detachment. His voice was flat, certain. “No. Elias would not be this easy to catch. More likely a carry-mule. Someone just hired to take things to meetings you can’t afford to attend.” He set the papers back into the case with deliberate care, snapping it shut like sealing a coffin, the faint clack ringing with finality.

The captive bucked once, eyes darting between them with wild fear and thin defiance, the cloth in his mouth muffling his words to a half-garbled plea. He forced them out around the gag, broken but desperate. “I don’t… know what you’re talking about…” His voice was low, strained, every syllable squeezed past the fabric and dampened by saliva. He thrashed harder as Arthur crouched down beside him, the sharp intensity of Arthur’s gaze pinning him in place as effectively as Syloki’s knee. Arthur’s voice dropped, low and dangerous, each word delivered like a verdict. “Don’t waste our time. What’s the purpose of the device?”

But just as Arthur had suspected, the man’s eyes filled with confusion more than calculation. He shook his head violently, the gag muffling his pitiful groans as his body sagged against the cobbles. His gaze darted between them, wide and wet, not the look of someone guarding secrets but the hollow panic of a man out of his depth. He didn’t know. He wasn’t meant to know. He was only ever the mule. The blueprints told a clearer story than his lips ever could, and Arthur felt that bitter confirmation settle in his chest like iron.

Arthur leaned back against the damp wall of the alley, the faint scrape of brick against his coat as he exhaled slow through his nose, eyes fixed on the closed case like it might sprout teeth if he blinked too long. His voice was steady, the cadence of a man who had spent too many nights pulling sense from fragments. “Syloki, you’re new in town. You don’t know their rituals yet. The Ember Circle—this cult—they like their fire. They don’t just use it, they glorify it. Worship it. They burn things to send a message, some nonsense about rebirth and ashes. Fire is theater for them.” He tapped the case with two fingers, his jaw tightening. “But this… this isn’t theater. Look at the chamber. Look at the pressure lines. They’re all wrong for combustibles. Too thin, too delicate, not built for flame. This is new. This is someone else’s idea sneaking in under their banner.”

Syloki tilted her head, a half-smile curling her lips as though she were testing his words, tasting the edges of his certainty. Her tone was light, casual, as if the two of them were merely talking over drinks in some dim tavern instead of pinning a man to the stones in a rat-crawling alley. “This city is interesting,” she mused, her eyes flicking toward the lamplight glinting off slick cobbles. “I can see why so many people decide to stay even knowing the crime rate here in Doskvol is the highest in the country. It’s like no one leaves once they’re caught in its teeth.” She adjusted her weight on the captive, drawing a muffled groan from beneath her knee, but her gaze never left Arthur.

Arthur didn’t return the smile. His expression had sharpened, brows pulled down into the lines of thought he wore like scars. “It’s a delivery device for a chemical weapon, maybe. Or worse. Whatever it is, it isn’t the Circle’s usual appetite.” He crouched again, holding the schematic to the dim light that trickled between the alley’s eaves, his voice lowering into a grim rhythm. “The Circle prefers fear and fire. They like people screaming, running. They like to see the flames

rise. But this…" He shook the page slightly, the crisp scratch of paper underscoring his words. "This isn't spectacle. This is quiet. This is control. And whoever thought of it isn't just trying to burn the city—they're trying to choke it."

Syloki's smile slipped, replaced by a tension that pulled at the corners of her mouth and settled heavy in her eyes. The casual veneer she had worn peeled back, leaving only the sharper edge of intent. Her hand pressed harder against the gag in the captive's mouth, as if grounding her thoughts through his muffled protest. "If this weapon isn't standard for the Circle," she said carefully, each word weighed and deliberate, "then someone else must be involved. Someone with the power to hand them designs and the coin to push them through." Her gaze flicked to the case again, then back to Arthur, her voice quieter now, nearly drowned by the drip of water down the wall. "We need to identify them before this thing moves from paper to street."

Arthur nodded once, the kind of nod that was less agreement than confirmation of the thought already etched into his skull. The faint steam of his breath drifted in the cold air as he let his eyes linger on Syloki, measuring her the way he measured blueprints, watching for faults, testing her structure under pressure. "You're right. Whoever's behind this, they're not building toys. They're building strategy." His words fell heavy between them, thick with the knowledge that Doskvol itself might soon be the test field. For a brief second, the sounds of the city—the distant clang of a bell, the shuffle of a drunk, the soft wingbeat of a crow overhead—seemed to still, leaving only the weight of what they'd uncovered.

Syloki's fingers moved with a precision that was almost unsettling, every gesture measured, deliberate, controlled. When she yanked the handkerchief free from the captive's mouth, the man sucked in air so fast it rasped through his teeth, his chest heaving like a bellows desperate for fuel. But the scream Arthur half-expected never came. Instead, the man's eyes darted wildly, glistening with fear, flickering between Syloki's face and the shadows beyond, as though searching for some salvation that would not arrive. Syloki leaned down closer, her voice carrying a cutting sharpness that wavered only slightly at the edges. "If I ever catch you doing this shitty work again, you're dead, you hear me? Go fix your life, man. Because if you don't, next time I won't be kind enough to let you breathe again." Her words dripped with both warning and dismissal, the kind of threat meant to burn into memory more than flesh.

Before he could muster a reply, her hand shot up, covering his mouth with her palm, pinching his nostrils shut with practiced ease. His eyes bulged wide, terror overtaking defiance in an instant, and his body bucked beneath her as though raw panic could throw her weight off him. Arthur stood still, watching, his face unreadable but his fingers tightening imperceptibly around the case in his hand. The captive's veins stood out like cords along his neck, his lips flushing dark before turning a deep crimson shade. Every wheeze and muffled grunt only seemed to fuel Syloki's determination, her grip unwavering, cold, efficient, merciless in its steadiness. The alley filled with the raw sound of desperate air struggling for release, then softened as the fight began to drain from him. His limbs grew heavy, twitching feebly against the cobblestones, his red face collapsing into purpled slackness until finally, with a last useless gasp, he went limp under her.

Syloki released him with surgical timing, pulling her hand away just before death claimed him, leaving him in that fragile threshold between consciousness and oblivion. She pressed two fingers to his throat, feeling for the pulse like a gambler verifying a coin's weight, and a slight twitch of satisfaction crossed her lips when she found it beating faintly. Her chest rose and fell quickly, not with exertion but with a simmering current of emotion carefully tucked behind her sharp, deliberate motions. Without hesitation, she stuffed the handkerchief back into his mouth, rougher this time, forcing it deep enough that his limp body offered no resistance. The indignity of it all left him sprawled on the cold stones, helpless, stinking, and unconscious, a discarded tool left behind by the very people who sent him to carry secrets he couldn't even comprehend.

Arthur broke the silence at last, his voice low and practical, a counterweight to Syloki's storm. "We should at least drag him to a corner," he said, stepping closer, eyes dropping to the unconscious body as though the man were nothing more than a logistical problem to be solved. The suggestion hung between them like smoke, not borne of mercy but of pragmatism—one less obvious body to draw attention when the street stirred awake again. But Syloki, her lips twisting in distaste, shook her head slowly, the gesture sharp and absolute. Her eyes, narrowed and gleaming with a mix of disdain and loathing, flicked down to the man at her feet. "I ain't touching him again," she snapped, her voice curling into disgust. She leaned back slightly, nostrils flaring, and added with a grimace, "Do you smell that? He pissed himself."

The stench was unmistakable now, sharp ammonia rising from the stones, mingling with the damp mildew of the alley and the faint copper tang of blood from earlier scuffles. Arthur made no move to argue further, his silence serving as agreement enough. Both of them knew the man was no longer worth the effort, just one more body Doskvol would swallow without hesitation. Syloki brushed invisible dust from her coat sleeve, as though cleansing herself of even the residual touch of him, and adjusted her blade back into its sheath with a small, metallic click that punctuated her choice. Her face hardened again, slipping back into the cool, unreadable mask she wore like armor.

Arthur glanced once more at the briefcase still in his grasp, its weight reminding him of the schematics inside—proof that their night had not been wasted, even if their captive had. He turned to Syloki, his expression settling into the calm determination that was as much his signature as his tools and chalk. "Then we leave him," he said simply. Syloki gave the unconscious man one last look, not with pity but with the kind of finality reserved for things already dead to her, and then she turned on her heel, the alley's lamplight casting her silhouette long against the wet bricks. Together, they walked out into the deeper dark, parting ways with few words but with an unspoken promise that their paths would cross again. Elias Wren was still out there, and so was the device. Doskvol's night seemed to breathe around them, the city's endless secrets coiling tighter, waiting for the next hand bold enough to pry them open.

The underground workshop breathed the same tired heat, copper ribs and vented lungs pushing out air that smelled faintly of steam and scorched dust, the ceiling dripping slow condensation onto stone where warmth met the cold weight of the earth above. Arthur stood again with a chipped mug cooling in his hand, its rim carrying the bitter ghost of coffee long since gone tepid, and his eyes pinned once more to the slate wall where the investigation lived like a parasite that refused to loosen its bite. The board looked heavier tonight, crowded with new chalk lines that slashed across the older scuffs, as though each question had bred a fresh brood of doubts. Lampglow caught on the chalk dust like filings magnetized in midair, and the hum of the Emporium's deep machinery thrummed through the floorboards and up into his ribs, tuning him to its restless heartbeat. He shifted the mug from one hand to the other, knuckles stiff, chalk still worked into the creases of his skin, and told himself he had only come to look—but his eyes moved like a craftsman sighting flaws, unable to stop measuring. Lannic had told him to rest, to let the fire die down, but Arthur's jaw was a locked gear, and gears never learned to stop.

The egg sketch still dominated the slate, the ovoid shape drawn with punishing strokes so that even smudges could not erase it. Vents crosshatched its sides like jagged teeth, annotated with timing marks, the architecture of dispersal disguised in geometry. Beneath it, the words EGG SHAPE? were still carved deep into the surface, the question mark gouged darker than doubt itself. Around it, the same corona of taped fragments—metal casings, ignition coil, black residue—framed the sketch like relics orbiting their idol, each arrow stabbing back toward the impossible whole. FIRE and GAS remained crossed out like bad jokes, DISPERSION? circled

so many times it looked like the orbit of a planet. But tonight there was more. On the steel table below, a new weight had joined the crate of parts: a folded set of blueprints rescued from a courier's briefcase, their edges singed, their diagrams bristling with wires and pipes that bled into the same pressure schematics as the egg. Arthur had set them in the box like a confession, paper rattling whenever the underground draft moved, accusing him of not yet knowing how to read it all. The stink of canal water and cheap ink still clung to them, layered over by the memory of sweat and fear from the man who dropped them.

The names on the ledger had not changed, but the lines between them had multiplied. Emberlash = BUILDER, underlined once, the Circle = delivery mechanism (zealots, loyal footsoldiers), written in that scornful hand. Across from them still sat the faceless square, PATRON = UNKNOWN HAND BEHIND THE CURTAIN, boxed twice until the chalk dust feathered like ash. Elias Wren's name had not moved from its hinge position—antiquities dealer, laundering coin, smuggling power in plain sight. The same ugly triangle of arrows pinned Wren between patron, circle, and egg. But now, another line extended from his name, slanting down and away, a fresh incision into the slate that ended in a new word: SYLOKI. The letters were neat, deliberate, not yet weighed down by certainty, but underlined with a hesitation Arthur could not quite admit even to himself. Beneath her name he had written, in smaller script: reckless. friend? foe? The chalk hesitated on that question mark, too, as if it wanted to cut deeper but thought better of it. He stepped back to study the lattice of names, strings of blame and possibility webbing the slate, and for the first time in days the silence felt like it was staring back.

His gaze snagged, as it always did, on the Blade Chronicle headline pinned to the left. HORROR RETURNS TO DOSKVOL still screamed in its block letters, underlined twice by his own hand until the paper puckered like a wound. Merrow Valesque's name haunted that ink, a fuse that whispered from the corner of his eye, and Arthur had left it there as a constant infection—control versus spectacle, fire versus order. Merrow's chaos did not fit the blueprints in the box or the egg on the board, but Arthur underlined it all the same because chaos had a habit of turning up where the city was weakest. He stood in the glow of lamp and dust and graphite, a man surrounded by evidence that grew louder without saying a thing. The board was not a map anymore; it was a mirror, reflecting him back in fragments of chalk and ash.

Arthur sat down at last, the chair creaking under his weight, and lifted the mug to his lips. The coffee was bitter and cold, but he drank anyway, letting it scrape the back of his throat with the same stubborn patience that had kept him alive this long. He stared at the board until the edges of the shapes blurred, until Syloki's name and Elias's triangle bled together into one jagged scrawl. His hand flexed once, twice, the ache in his bitten wrist a reminder of how close the answers always were and how quickly they slipped under the surface. "Fuck it," he muttered finally, voice low, the words iron-heavy in the stale air. He pushed back from the table, set the mug aside, and reached for his coat.

The lamps burned on, chasing shadows against the slate, but Arthur turned his back on them. He slid into the coat, the fabric stiff with soot and chalk streaks, and walked out, boots heavy against the stone. He left the workshop as it was—board full of arrows pointing nowhere, a box full of evidence demanding questions he could not yet answer, names written harder than truth and softer than trust. The underground breathed on without him, vents sighing, water dripping, machines humming, the whole place alive with secrets. For tonight, the questions would wait. The room was empty now, save for the echo of chalk lines and the bitter ghost of coffee cooling beside an unfinished map of the war to come.

Part II – Shadows in Motion…

Chapter 5: **Blueprints in Smoke**

The Shadow's Den did not breathe so much as it exhaled secrets, every corner full of smoke and velvet, every table a stage where shadows leaned closer than friends. Candlelight licked the gold threads of the tapestries until they looked like veins, alive and pulsing, while the curtains smothered any hint of daylight. The smell was a heady mix of spiced wine, burnt sugar, and the faint iron tang of coin that had changed hands for something best left unspoken. Arthur sat deep in the leather booth, the kind worn smooth by years of elbows and whispered schemes, his arm stretched along the backrest and his gaze angled to watch the bar where Ezra Nightshade moved like a machine carved from obsidian. The man poured drinks with the silence of a ritual, eyes never missing the shiver of a hand or the twitch of a mouth. Arthur had been in plenty of places across Doskvol where law was nothing more than a bad joke, but the Den was different—law wasn't just absent, it was irrelevant.

Adrian leaned back across from him, his long frame folded into the booth, a glass of something cheap and red resting in his hand. His eyes kept darting, not because he was nervous but because he couldn't help cataloging the room the same way Arthur did. Their usual haunt was a smoky hole near Coalridge, full of dockhands who didn't know when to quit, but tonight had called for something else, a change of rhythm. "Not bad," Adrian said, his voice casual but tinged with that dry humor of his. "Though I keep expecting the walls to start whispering my secrets back to me." He tipped his drink and smirked. "Probably would be more entertaining than half the people in here." Arthur chuckled, low and short, tapping a finger against his glass. "Careful. Whisper too loud and the Den might answer."

They spoke in the kind of low, steady tones that blended into the murmur of the place, small talk laced with sharp edges. Adrian leaned in, lowering his voice further. "You heard about that balloon mess?" The way he said it made it sound like a circus act gone wrong, and in some ways, it had been. Arthur exhaled through his nose, eyes still on the bar. "Hard not to. Word is it wasn't even supposed to have an audience. No coin to be made in tickets, just wagers in backrooms. Started with some lunatic noble who liked watching people fall from the sky for sport, and now it's just another tradition for Doskvol's underbelly." He shook his head slightly, lips pressed thin. "Idiots risking their necks in patched-up balloons, calling it competition."

Adrian smirked into his drink. "Competition makes it sound noble. I was there, Arthur, and it was sabotage in the sky. Crews trying to ram each other, cut lines, light each other's rigs on fire." He lifted his brows, as though amused at the sheer audacity. "Doesn't sound like a race to me. Sounds like a war with betting slips." Arthur gave a humorless smile, a flicker of memory crossing his expression. "You're not wrong. What mattered wasn't the race itself—it was who walked away with bragging rights, who looked like they could outmaneuver the rest. That was the real prize." His voice lowered, almost thoughtful now. "And some of those bastards managed to prove they weren't just muscle on the ground."

The booth's corner made their words feel cocooned, though Arthur kept his gaze wandering, watching Ezra glide behind the bar, catching glimpses of deals being struck with nothing more than the curl of a hand. "Still," Adrian said, breaking the quiet, "gotta admit there's something fitting about it. Balloons floating over Doskvol like fat fireflies, nobody below even knowing what's happening above their heads." He shook his head with a laugh. "City's got enough chaos on the streets, now it's in the bloody sky too." Arthur finally took a sip of his drink, the burn dragging down his throat, and leaned back with a sigh. "Chaos finds its way into every corner here. Doesn't matter if it's alleys, canals, or clouds. Doskvol makes sure of it."

Arthur glanced toward the windows where the curtains held back the night, a faint hum of the city still pressing in like a heartbeat beneath their conversation. He felt the quiet weight of the last few weeks, the ambush that had nearly cost them both their necks, and the strange ease of sitting in this place that wasn't theirs. The Shadow's Den wasn't where they belonged, but for tonight, the unfamiliar air suited them. Adrian swirled the last of his drink, watching it catch the candlelight. "Different place, same city," he muttered. "But I'll take it. Nice to sit where the walls do some of the watching for you." Arthur smirked, setting his glass down with a quiet thud. "Just don't forget, walls here don't forget either."

Adrian swirled the amber in his glass, watching the liquid catch the dim light before he spoke again, his tone laced with irritation more than regret. "We both know how that race went. Lannic sent us up with a crew—quick with rope, reckless enough to call themselves pilots. They weren't much, though—his name bought the balloon and your sketches gave them wings, but crude wings, rushed wings. They got clipped easy, ripped apart like paper once sabotage came calling. I should have known better." Arthur leaned back, shoulders pressing into the velvet of the booth, jaw tightening. "Precision doesn't matter in a city of cheats and ghosts. You can design all the gears you want, but one stray blade in the cord and it all comes down in fire."

Adrian tilted his head, a faint smirk curling at his lips as he tapped his finger against the rim of his glass. "We were a hammer in a room full of knives. I felt it the moment they cut our rig apart. They feared the blow—that's the truth of it. No one wanted to see a Cypher rig win clean, so they made sure it didn't." His gaze flicked across the room, studying faces he wasn't really looking at. "Still, Lannic made his coin. Right bets, right hands, walked away with pockets heavier even if the balloon burned. That's the way he plays—losing the game but buying the table."

Arthur gave a dry chuckle, humorless and sharp. "Buying tables won't fix the leaks in my damn valves." He shook his head, setting the glass down with a quiet thud. "And then there's that new lot, fresh out of Crow's Foot. Don't even know what to call themselves. 'The crew from Crow's Foot'—too long. They need a name or better yet, cut it short to just 'Crows.' Simpler. Easier to remember when people are muttering about them in alleys." His brow furrowed, eyes narrowing at the thought. "They made a mess of things. Too brazen, too loud, but it worked."

Adrian leaned forward, elbows on the table, his voice dropping into a more conspiratorial tone. "The Crows proved one thing—they're willing to get their hands dirty. They'll take risks, cut corners, and pull stunts no one else will. That's why they rattled everyone in that race. One of them, I seen it, can twist a man's head with nothing but a word. Mind manipulation, Arthur. Imagine trying to steer ropes and counterweights when your own thoughts turn traitor." His smirk didn't quite hide the unease flickering behind it. "That's not sabotage, that's sorcery."

Arthur's lip curled, half sneer, half weary amusement. "And yet, Bruce Wallunde's still chasing us, not them. Bounty hunter should be running down the bastards with tricks crawling under their tongues, but no—he's got his nose pointed at the Cyphers, always. It's enough to make you think someone's steering him, too." He took another drink, slower this time, letting the burn steady his temper. "We put our designs in the sky and got punished for it. They put chaos up there, and the city clapped."

Adrian shrugged, leaning back with a lazy grace that didn't reach his eyes. "Different rules for different crews. No one fears men who try to build something. They fear the ones who'll happily burn it down. That's the game we're in now—builders against breakers. And the breakers? They're drawing all the eyes." He tilted his glass toward Arthur like a mock toast. "Best hope Lannic keeps betting on us, because the knives in this city aren't getting any duller."

Arthur's jaw flexed as Adrian's words settled, the bitter taste of them dragging down like grit in his drink. "They're messy," he muttered, voice low, each syllable rubbed raw with irritation. "Messy wins races, messy stirs panic, messy gets remembered. That quality—what rattled us in the sky—that makes them useful beyond the balloons. Convoys, sabotage runs, street-level operations where there isn't time for polish. Their lack of refinement is a weakness in the workshop, but it's a strength out there, in the gutters. Unpredictable beats reliable more often than we'd like to admit." He pressed his thumb to glass rim, the sound faint against the murmur of the Den. "They humiliated us in the sky, but if they can humiliate Veylock or the Circle for us instead?" He looked up, eyes narrow, voice clipped to the bone. "Worth the bruise."

Adrian's smirk came slow, curling as though he'd been waiting for Arthur to give ground. He leaned forward, elbows braced on the scarred wood, his tone dropping to something conspiratorial. "Never thought I'd hear you call another crew an asset. But you're right. They don't have engineering in their blood, not like us. No precision, no craft. They don't build—hell, they barely fix what breaks. But they play with chaos like it's rope and cord, and somehow they make it sing. That's something you can't design, Arthur. It's born, not built." He tilted his empty glass toward the bar, eyes flicking across the room with a scavenger's patience. "Maybe it's time we stop worrying about being cut apart and start learning how to aim the knives."

Arthur's reply was cut short by movement at the door. The shift of air as the heavy curtain fell back drew his gaze sharper than the sound of coin on the tables. A man stepped inside, his presence unannounced, yet the Den seemed to tilt subtly around him. He was lean, wrapped in black wool that swallowed the candlelight, with a coat that looked like it had tasted rain for decades and grown used to disappointment. His face was pale, almost colorless, framed by spectacles that glinted faintly in the gloom. In one hand he carried a book like a priest might cradle scripture, in the other he toyed with something small, a piece of dark red that caught the light and vanished again between his fingers. His movements were deliberate, patient, as though fate itself had taught him how to take his time.

Adrian shifted in the booth, watching him thread through the haze. "Rabbit's Foot," he murmured, recognition in his tone, though he said it like testing a coin's edge. The man looked nothing like the riot the Crows had stirred at the race; no loud bravado, no wild grin. Just a figure shaped by silence and chance, a gambler who might already know how the night would end. He found a spot at the bar, sat with the weight of someone who didn't need to demand space, and lifted a glass like it was the most natural ritual in the world. Ezra poured without comment, sliding it across as though the deal had been struck long before the man walked in.

Arthur let his eyes linger, jaw tightening. "Doesn't look like much of a threat," he said, words ground out flat, more to himself than to Adrian. "Skinny bastard with a book and a lucky charm. If that's the wild card, we're betting on smoke." But he didn't look away, not once. The Den had started gathering whispers about the Crows, about their mess, about the way they turned chaos into a weapon. And here was one of them, drinking in their shadow, undisturbed as though the city itself bowed to the weight of his odds.

For a long moment, neither Cypher spoke. The smoke from the nearby tables curled upward in lazy spirals, threading between the candles, and the murmur of deals played on like a score beneath their silence. They watched Rabbit's Foot lift his glass, sip slow, and rest it back on the bar with a calm that grated against everything they'd just said about unpredictability. Arthur tapped a finger against the rim of his glass, rhythm tight, his mind already turning the angles. Lannic wanted them to make contact. The Crows might be the knife they needed. But knives had a way of slipping in the wrong hands.

Adrian finally broke the silence, his voice pitched low but carrying the kind of finality that could cut through smoke and doubt alike. "Well, he is the reason we're here tonight. So let's get this

done with, huh." His words hung between them like a match before the strike, and Arthur gave a curt nod, the weight of inevitability pressing at the corners of his mouth. They raised their glasses together, the clink muted against the Den's velvet murmur, and drank in unison—one bitter swallow sealing Lannic's orders into action. The burn traced down Arthur's throat, sharp enough to make him grind his teeth, and when he set the glass back on the table his eyes didn't leave Adrian. He watched as the man's long frame unfolded from the booth with a lazy kind of grace, the hunter's calm that always disguised the edge beneath.

Adrian moved toward Rabbit's Foot with the caution of someone approaching a sleeping blade, slow at first, each step tested against the hum of the room. Arthur's gaze followed him, tracking every shift in his posture, every flick of candlelight across his dark coat. The Weaver sat at the bar, shoulders drawn in a way that made his figure seem almost too slight for the reputation whispered in alleys, his book resting on the counter as though it had claimed the space before he had. Adrian slid onto the stool beside him, the creak of wood under his weight a small intrusion into the man's undisturbed ritual. He leaned forward, signaling Ezra with a lift of his hand, and said evenly, "Buy you a drink?"

Rabbit didn't even glance at him at first, just toyed with the glass in his hand before letting out a half-bored, half-amused murmur. "Do I know you, pal?" The words fell without bite, but they carried the kind of indifference that made Arthur's jaw flex across the room. Adrian, ever the diplomat, wore his most practiced smile, one that held just enough warmth to seem genuine while hiding the steel behind it. "Perhaps not. Not yet. But you know who I work for. I represent Lannic Morrow tonight." He tapped two fingers lightly against the bar, rhythm measured, confidence coiled beneath casualness.

Rabbit lifted his drink, took his time with it, the silence itself feeling like a card turned face down on the table. He swallowed slow before answering, voice dry as paper. "Ahhh. Another Cypher. Sorry about that balloon." The grin he allowed himself afterward was small but sharp, like a cut too fine to stitch. Adrian waved the words away with an easy gesture, dismissing the sting as though it hadn't dug bone-deep into Arthur, who clenched a fist around his glass in the shadows. "A race is a race. And believe me, I was there, watching you lot pull that trick from up close. Not something I'll forget soon. What do we call you?"

Rabbit's lips twitched, but he didn't quite smile. "We don't have a name. Yet." His eyes stayed on the glass, ignoring the man beside him even as he spoke. Adrian tilted his head, admiration softening his voice despite himself. "The new guys from Crow's Foot. It's a mouthful." Rabbit answered with a nod, but offered nothing more, letting the weight of silence reclaim its ground. Adrian pushed on, leaning closer with a conspirator's tone. "We like the way you act, you know. We have more… things… we need help with." Rabbit's head turned slightly then, eyes narrowing as if trying to catch the shape of the offer before it was spoken. "For coin, I hope." Adrian's smile returned, sharp and certain. "Of course. Always."

The Weaver set his glass down, the sound soft but final, and studied Adrian with the patience of someone who measured luck by how long he could let silence breathe. "What's the job?" he asked at last. Adrian glanced sideways, scanning the room with a subtle sweep, lingering on Ezra who was busy pouring a drink for a pair of rough-looking dockmen. "Not here," Adrian murmured. "Not safe for secrets. But can I assume that you will at least hear our proposal?" Rabbit's reply was a riddle wrapped in indifference. "Maybe. If it's good." Adrian's grin widened, flashing teeth in the dim glow. "Good. We will be in touch then." He rose from the stool, movements deliberate, and began to walk away, his coat brushing the smoke-heavy air.

He hadn't taken three steps before Rabbit's voice followed him, cool and unhurried. "How the hell am I going to hear from you?" Adrian paused just long enough to glance back over his shoulder, that smile still curling his lips, half-charm and half-threat. "Don't worry about that. You'll

get a message soon enough. The Cyphers have ways of finding things in Doskvol." With that, he strode out into the night without looking back, his silhouette swallowed by the curtain at the door. A moment later, Arthur rose from the booth, his own glass left half-drained on the table, and followed him out into the fog-slick street, the weight of Rabbit's gaze still pressing between his shoulders.

Back at the Emporium, the upstairs shop had gone silent for the night, the counters wiped clean and the windows shuttered against the fog. But below, down through a narrow stair hidden behind a wall of neatly stacked crates, the heartbeat of the Cyphers pulsed steady in the underground chamber where their true work lived. The ceiling hung low, lined with thick pipes that rattled faintly, and the pale glow of electroplasmic lanterns washed the stone in a cold, steady light. The air smelled of hot metal and machine oil, tinged with the bitter sting of solder, and the wide worktable in the center of the room was littered with maps, coded messages, and half-finished devices that gleamed with stubborn sparks. Lannic stood at the heavy iron door, his long coat drawn close and the silver fittings at his cuffs catching the lantern glow, a reminder of precision even in shadows. In his hand, he held an envelope sealed with waxless folds, cream-colored paper thick as pressed hide, which he pressed into the courier's palm—a man who kept his eyes low, shoulders tight beneath his coat.

"Just hand this to whoever opens the door," Lannic instructed, his voice flat as hammered steel. He passed another slip of paper, smaller, scrawled with an address and instructions in his sharp, blocky hand. "They're expecting something already. All you say is: Message from Lannic Morrow. Then you walk away. Nothing more. Do you hear me?" His one mechanical finger clicked faintly against the page as he let go, a reminder that he was not a man given to repetition. The courier nodded once, silently, and pocketed both papers. Lannic pressed a couple of coins into his palm, the dull weight of silver clinking against calloused skin, and with that, the man slipped out into the fog, the door sealing shut behind him with a sound like a vault closing.

When Lannic turned back into the room, his height seemed to fill it, the ruin of his burned features catching the lamplight in fractured planes. At the long table, three figures sat waiting, their faces a study in patience and expectation. Silas Thorn, shoulders draped in shadow, his fingers ticking against the wood like a metronome. Adrian Blackwood, relaxed in posture but sharp in the eyes, his voice always ready with a calculation dressed as a jest. And Arthur Xavier, rigid in his chair, his gaze fixed on the scattered blueprints and scraps of coil wire that littered the table, his jaw tight with the memory of past failures. The air between them carried the stale tang of old smoke and the faint trace of solder still clinging to the stone walls.

"Gentlemen," Lannic began, his voice low and commanding, a sound that carried the authority of both a craftsman and a general. "Thank you for joining me tonight. As you are aware, we have an urgent task at hand—one that requires the utmost caution and precision." His scarred hand gestured toward the table where a rolled schematic lay like a secret unspoken. "Our prototype needs to be transported safely across town this time, and given the events of our previous attempt, we cannot afford any mistakes." His sharp gaze lingered on each of them in turn, weighing their resolve, testing their silence for cracks.

Silas was the first to speak, his words clipped, a crow's rasp tucked beneath the measured cadence. "We are going to try again so soon?" He leaned forward, fingers still ticking against the wood, the sound steady, insistent. "Last time we tried, the Ember Circle attacked. We took heavy losses. Men who won't be patched back together by tools or time." His eyes were dark, his face unreadable, but the accusation hung there, a ghost between them, demanding reckoning.

Arthur’s reply came measured, spoken through teeth ground into patience. He straightened slightly, his eyes narrowing on the schematic. “We’ll make sure this time goes smoothly.” His tone carried both steel and doubt, a craftsman’s confidence tethered to memory’s scars. “What’s the plan, Lannic?” The question cut through the tension, redirecting it toward the man at the head of the table. Lannic’s scarred features bent into something like a grim smile, humorless and edged.

“Our intelligence suggests the Ember Circle is aware of our intentions and may attempt to intercept the convoy again,” he said, his words slow and deliberate, each one weighted with the burden of inevitability. “That is why I’ve called upon each of you tonight. The core members of the Cyphers. Your loyalty and expertise are indispensable in ensuring the success of this operation.” His gaze swept over them like the steady burn of a furnace, scarred skin tight against bone, mechanical finger twitching against his palm as though the plan itself was already sparking into motion. The room seemed to draw tighter with the words, the hiss of the pipes overhead punctuating the silence that followed, a silence heavy with the knowledge of what was to come.

Silas leaned forward in his chair, the lamplight pulling the sharp lines of his face into shadow, his voice carrying the steady calm of a man who had lived too long in the margins. “The Ember Circle? They won’t catch us off guard this time. I’ll have eyes on every shadow.” The way he said it left no doubt; it was less a promise and more a fact, shaped by years of watching streets where trust was a rarer currency than coin. His gaze swept across the table, steady, unwavering, until it landed on Lannic, waiting for the next stone to be placed in this wall they were building.

Lannic gave a curt nod, the scars across his face drawn taut in the glow of the single lamp overhead. “Good to hear, Silas. We need your vigilance now more than ever.” His words carried weight, each syllable ironclad, as he turned toward Adrian, his tone shifting to one of command sharpened by expectation. “Adrian, I’m counting on you to coordinate the logistics and ensure our routes are secure. We can’t afford any surprises.” The underground chamber seemed to lean into his voice, the pipes above groaning softly as though echoing the gravity of the moment.

Adrian tilted his head back slightly, a wry smile touching his lips though it never reached his eyes. “Consider it done, Lannic. I’ll have our defenses and contingencies in place. We won’t give the Circle an inch.” He said it with the ease of a man who had rehearsed disasters a hundred times in his mind, every street corner mapped, every tram bell accounted for, every canal turn measured against the weight of failure. He tapped the edge of the table once with his knuckle, as though sealing the promise into the wood itself, then leaned back in his chair, letting his confidence mask the knot of worry in his chest.

Arthur shifted in his seat, the silence stretching until he filled it with his voice, low and clipped. “And what’s my role in all of this, Lannic?” His eyes were on the schematic spread across the table, tracing the lines and curves of the convoy route, but the tension in his jaw gave him away. He wanted clarity, purpose, something to turn into action rather than theory. The lamp above flickered faintly, casting a ripple across the paper like the shadow of something passing over water.

Lannic leaned forward, one hand braced against the table, the other curling loosely at his side. “Arthur, you’ll be at the protection of the escort team, keeping our convoy safe. Your experience and resourcefulness will be invaluable in navigating any obstacles we encounter.” The words were carved out like stone, direct and unyielding, but there was trust woven through them, an anchor among the tension. Arthur straightened at that, his eyes lifting from the page to meet Lannic’s gaze, and the faintest hint of relief softened the hard lines of his face.

“I won’t let you down, Lannic,” Arthur said, his voice edged with determination. “We’ll get this prototype where it needs to go, no matter what.” The conviction in the words seemed to settle the air, a momentary stillness before the pipes hissed again overhead. Lannic nodded once, the ghost of something like approval in the set of his scarred mouth. “That’s what I like to hear. Remember, the success of this mission hinges on our unity and resolve. We’ll show the Ember Circle that the Cyphers are not to be trifled with. Let’s make this delivery a testament to our strength and determination.” He paused then, his sharp gaze scanning the three men seated at the table before adding, “Gentlemen, there’s one more crucial aspect of this mission that I need to discuss with you. We won’t be alone in this endeavor. I’ve enlisted the help of a crew specifically trained in transporting delicate cargo across the city. They may be new to us, but they’ve shown remarkable resilience and skill.”

Silas gave a quiet scoff, though not dismissive, just the habitual reaction of a man who’d seen too many green hands fold when it mattered most. “New blood, eh? Well, as long as they can keep up, I suppose we’ll manage.” His eyes flicked sideways toward Adrian, who returned the look with a flicker of humor he didn’t voice. Across the table, Arthur caught Adrian’s glance, and the two of them exchanged a look that needed no words. They could already guess who this new crew had to be. It had to be those brash, reckless bastards from Crow’s Foot—the very same they had reached out to in the smoke-thick corners of the Shadow’s Den just nights ago. The thought left a sour taste in Arthur’s mouth, but beneath it was the bitter pragmatism of necessity. Sometimes, knives too wild to wield were exactly the kind worth pointing at your enemies.

Lannic let the pause stretch, his scarred features unreadable in the lamplight before he finally spoke again, voice carrying the iron weight of certainty. “Indeed. Additionally, I’ve secured the services of a renowned bounty hunter to join our ranks. Conrad Rian, also known as Constant, has agreed to lend his expertise to our cause. He’s an old friend of mine and has proven himself time and again in the field.” The name seemed to hang in the stale air of the chamber, a word weighted with both reputation and memory, stirring something like wary recognition in each of them. The sound of steam groaning through the pipes overhead filled the silence until Adrian leaned forward with that quick spark in his eyes.

“Constant?” Adrian said, the name leaving his lips half in surprise, half in appreciation. “I’ve heard of him. If anyone can watch our backs, it’s him.” His tone carried the ease of someone accustomed to putting faith in reputation, though the twitch of his brow betrayed a calculation already running behind his words. He rubbed a thumb across the rim of his glass, the faint scrape filling the silence as though to steady himself. Silas, by contrast, was unmoved, his expression hard as he shifted slightly in his chair, leaning his weight forward on his forearms.

“Lannic,” Silas said slowly, the syllables careful and measured, “who exactly are these new crew members? You say they’re resilient, but I’d like to know more about them.” The air seemed to tighten around his question, suspicion threading through it, as though every shadow in the room leaned closer to hear the answer. He wasn’t a man given to trust easily, and new allies, in Doskvol of all places, were just as likely to become knives in the back as shields at the front. His eyes narrowed on Lannic, waiting.

“Ah, yes,” Lannic said, his tone carrying a calm certainty, though there was a flicker of something sharper behind his eyes. “They’re a group I’ve had some dealings with in the past, albeit on a smaller scale. They’re relatively new to the scene, based out of the southeastern region of Crow’s Foot.” The words echoed faintly in the chamber, Crow’s Foot dragging a note of grit and tension into the space, conjuring alleyway smoke, gang tags painted over with fresher paint, the scent of cheap gin and gun oil that always clung to that district. Adrian gave a low whistle and leaned back in his chair, eyebrows lifting.

“Southeastern Crow’s Foot specifically?” Adrian said, incredulous now, his tone laced with both disbelief and grudging amusement. “That’s the old stomping grounds of the Royal Gang. You’re telling me these new guys are setting up shop there?” The thought was absurd on its face, but it was the kind of absurdity that made sense in a city that thrived on bad bets and broken thrones. Lannic’s face did not shift, did not soften, and when he answered his voice carried the flat weight of confirmation.

“Indeed. They’ve taken over the abandoned territory of the Royal Gang. A bold move, to be sure.” He looked at each of them as he spoke, gauging their reactions, letting the silence test their resolve. Adrian scoffed under his breath and leaned forward again, elbows against the wood, his smirk humorless. “Bold or reckless, if you ask me. Why choose such a notorious area?” Lannic’s response came quiet but sharp, every syllable like a pin driven into the table. “That’s a question that’s been on my mind as well. But regardless of their choice of location, they’ve proven themselves capable in the tasks I’ve assigned them.”

The new information made Arthur go still, his eyes drifting toward the shadows beyond the lamplight, his body settling into that familiar, brooding quiet that the others had long ago learned to recognize. He hadn’t known the Crows were settling in the old grounds of the Royal Family until this very moment, and the thought gnawed at him. He had never considered their location to hold importance—what mattered was their chaos, the reckless energy they carried, the way they thrived in disorder. But the Royal Family was different. Their horror had been a plague on Doskvol, a shadow that stretched over alleys and amusement parks alike, and though most of them still rotted in Ironscar, their legacy lingered like a bad scar. Then came the memory of the article, the headline seared into his mind from the crumpled copy of the Blade Chronicle he had read not long ago: HORROR RETURNS TO DOSKVOL. Merrow, loose again in the darkness, a name that made even hardened men swallow their curses. He hadn’t been seen since his escape, no sightings worth trust, no proof—only whispers. But Arthur knew the city too well. It was never a matter of if. Only when. And that thought, more than the Ember Circle or the convoy, was the weight that pressed sharpest in his chest.

Lannic’s voice cut through the hum of the underground chamber, sharp enough to drag Arthur out of the spiral he had sunk into. “Arthur? You’re drifting again.” The words snapped like a wire pulled too tight, and Arthur blinked hard, realizing with a twist of irritation that the conversation had continued without him while his thoughts had wandered into darker territory. He straightened in his chair, rolling his shoulders back as if to shake off the fog that had settled over him, forcing his focus to return to the table and the men seated around it. The lamplight flickered against the scarred walls, shadows crawling over their faces, and the sound of distant machinery rattled faintly through the floor as though reminding him that the world outside their plans never slept.

“Keep your wits about you, gentlemen,” Lannic went on, his tone low and commanding, his eyes like dark glass sweeping over each of them in turn. “Jack and his crew may be assets to us, but they’re also potential liabilities. We’ll need to tread carefully.” His words landed like stones in still water, ripples of unease spreading out through the room. The thought of leaning on outsiders—even dangerous, effective ones—sat uneasily in the air, and Arthur could see the way it tugged at the corners of Silas’s mouth.

“Understood, Lannic,” Silas said, his voice stripped of any flourish, flat as stone. “We’ll be on our guard.” He sat stiffly, hands folded on the table as though anchoring himself, his gaze unwavering. Adrian, on the other hand, leaned back with a smirk that barely concealed the edge beneath. “I’ll keep a close eye on them,” he said, his tone casual but sharp, “but I won’t trust them as far as I can throw them.” His fingers drummed idly against his thigh, a gesture too practiced to be careless, betraying a tension he wasn’t about to admit aloud.

Arthur gave a short nod, lips pressed thin, his voice emerging rough but steady. “Agreed. Let’s just hope this doesn’t come back to bite us.” He didn’t bother disguising the skepticism in his tone; he had lived long enough to know that hope was a poor shield against knives hidden under cloaks. The shadows deepened around them as the lamp flickered again, smoke from the oil pooling faintly near the ceiling, as if even the air braced for what was being asked of them.

Lannic’s scarred features bent into something grimly approving, and he continued without pause. “Now, onto the members of this new crew. Their leader is Jack—a Slide. Cunning, manipulative, with a dangerous talent for tampering with memories. He can make a man forget his own name if he wishes, and that is not a skill to underestimate. He is reckless, but clever, and it is his ambition that keeps the rest moving.” The words hung heavy, a warning as much as an introduction. He shifted his gaze to the next. “Then there’s Rabbit’s Foot, a quiet one. Elusive. He keeps to himself, but luck seems to favor him, and he has a strategist’s mind. The diversion plan we’re employing for this convoy was his idea, and I must admit—it is rather brilliant.” His tone carried a rare note of respect, grudging but unmistakable. Adrian’s expression flickered at that, a grin cutting across his lips as he leaned forward. “That’s right. We talked last night,” he said, his tone carrying admiration laced with incredulity that someone so unassuming could strike with such sharpness.

Arthur exhaled slowly, the sound little more than a whisper of breath over the table. “Impressive,” he said, deliberate, though his eyes narrowed with the weight of calculation. “And the others?” His words drew every gaze back to Lannic, who did not hesitate. “Ah yes. The wizard and the hound. The wizard is young, untested, but there’s a spark of potential in him—raw, but worth watching. The hound, however…” His voice tightened slightly, not with doubt but with emphasis. “She’s something else entirely. Stern, disciplined, and dangerous. Even her own comrades tread carefully around her, as though they know she could turn on them with the same precision she turns on her enemies.”

Adrian gave a low chuckle, though his eyes sharpened rather than softened. “Sounds like someone you wouldn’t want to cross.” It was admiration laced with unease, the kind reserved for storms that could sink ships. Lannic inclined his head once, slow and certain. “Indeed. She’s not one to mince words, but trouble of the useful kind—provided her focus remains where it should.” His conviction in the words left no room for doubt, and yet the silence that followed was weighted, pressing down heavier than argument could.

Silas broke it, his voice quieter now, though no less direct. “Have they had any contact with the prototype yet?” The question carried a blade hidden in its sheath, sharp and necessary. Lannic’s reply came swiftly, clipped but firm. “No, they haven’t. And I’d prefer to keep it that way for the time being. The less they know about the cargo, the better.” The words hung in the air like smoke, curling through the edges of the room, and Arthur felt the weight of them settle on his shoulders. He gave a single nod, his voice low but certain. “Agreed. We’ll keep a close watch on them and ensure the safety of the convoy.” His jaw tightened as he spoke, and the lamp hissed faintly as though it, too, strained under the pressure.

“Good,” Lannic said, and the force in the word filled the chamber with something close to finality. “We can’t afford any slip-ups this time. The success of this mission depends on it.” His voice reverberated off the stone, and the quiet that followed was thick, layered with steam and tension, each of them feeling the weight of what was being asked. The table sat between them like an altar, its surface scarred and worn, holding the plans that could shape their fate. Outside, the city exhaled its endless fog, and in that underground room, the Cyphers bound themselves to resolve as heavy and unyielding as the iron that caged the streets above.

The heavy iron door groaned as it swung open, the hinges coughing up the echo of years spent swallowing secrets. A figure stepped through, smoke and shadow parting around him as if the

room itself recognized an old accomplice. He carried himself with the easy swagger of a man who had seen too much and learned to grin at it, his long leather trench coat whispering across the stone floor before he shrugged it free. The coat landed with a careless toss across a chair, its folds spilling like a second shadow. Beneath, his shirt clung to a wiry frame, dotted with charms and talismans strung together in a way that looked haphazard yet deliberate, each piece a story too sharp to touch. His black hair was an unruly halo, falling across his brow with the defiance of someone who never bothered with mirrors. A cigarette hung from his lips, the ember glowing faint in the lamplight, trailing ribbons of smoke that curled like secrets eager to be overheard. His eyes—sharp, restless, and threaded with mischief—found the table as he crossed the room, each step landing with quiet certainty.

“Lannic, old friend,” he drawled, his voice a gravel-thick rumble laced with danger and amusement, the kind of sound that made the walls lean in to listen. “Long time no see.” He pulled the words like a card from a stacked deck, dealt with just enough weight to remind everyone present that he had been here before, in rooms like this, at tables like these, where decisions bent the city one way or another. His smirk didn’t falter as he slowed near the table, letting the silence stretch just long enough to command the space before the cigarette dipped and the smoke wrapped the lamp in a gauzy veil.

Lannic pushed back his chair and rose to meet him, tall and commanding, the scars that marred his face pulled into a smile warmer than his men often saw. The lamplight struck the ridged burn across his skin, softening it for just a breath as he extended his hand. “Constant, it’s good to have you here,” he said, his tone stripped of the bark that usually coated his orders, carrying instead the deep weight of familiarity. “Come, have a seat. We have much to catch up on.” Their handshake was firm, practiced, the kind of grip that carried years of fights fought near and far, and both men allowed themselves the faintest flicker of something dangerously close to affection.

Arthur, seated at the far side of the table, watched with narrowed eyes, his jaw tightening as he studied the man’s easy entrance. He was dressed in his usual working gear, sleeves rolled back to scarred forearms, shirt faintly stained with oil and solder from earlier labors, but his posture betrayed the soldier beneath the machinist—straight-backed, chin lifted, eyes sharp. His mind ran ahead, dissecting every trinket on Constant’s shirt, every scuff on his boots, cataloguing them with the same precision he applied to blueprints and gearwork. Adrian leaned against the table beside him, his dark eyes glittering with the sly humor of someone who never stopped calculating odds. He dressed with less severity, a looseness to his collar, the faint sheen of a man who liked to look comfortable even when plotting sabotage. Silas was quieter, a shadow in posture if not in form, his long coat draped neatly as he sat with hands folded, his gaze steady and unsmiling. His silence was not disinterest but the kind that listened to every word, weighed every gesture, storing them like blades in hidden sheaths.

As Constant settled into the chair across from Lannic, Arthur pushed his chair back with a scrape of wood against stone. He rose without a word, his expression unreadable but his eyes lingering on the cigarette smoke twisting lazily toward the pipes overhead. Adrian followed with a half-smile, muttering something about preparations, while Silas stood last, his steady presence moving like a shadow toward the door. Together, the three of them filed out, their boots echoing down the stone passageway, the weight of the coming mission heavy on their shoulders.

Left behind, the two old friends remained in the circle of light. Lannic poured the drinks himself, amber liquid splashing into glasses with a quiet authority, and passed one across the table. Constant leaned back in his chair, smoke curling from the end of his cigarette as he took the glass with a nod of thanks. He drew in a long drag, the glow flaring before he let out a cloud that drifted between them like a veil. His grin widened, and when his eyes locked on Lannic’s, there

was no humor in them—only the sharp, cutting focus of a man who knew favors always came chained to a price. “So,” he said, his voice low, roughened by smoke and memory. “What’s this favour you need from me this time?”

The Next Night (a scene drawn from ***Ashes of the Unseen***, Chapter 4)

The knock Rabbit’s Foot gave the door was firm, deliberate—enough to be heard over the quiet hum of whatever was going on inside, but not so loud as to make it seem like we were barging in. Jack shifted his weight next to me, his coat collar turned up like he was trying to look cooler than usual. Harry stood a step behind, glancing at the brick walls and the narrow alley that funneled down to the back of Lannic’s shop. I could tell he was half-expecting some grand, theatrical welcome. The door creaked open, and there was Arthur Xavier—expression even, eyes scanning over the three of us before settling on me. “Right on time,” he said. He stepped back, holding the door just wide enough for us to enter. The air inside was warmer than outside, tinged with the smell of oil, metal shavings, and something faintly acrid—burnt ozone from machinery, maybe. The shopfront gave way to a back corridor, and then down a set of narrow stairs to the place where the real business happened. We followed Arthur down, the sound of our boots echoing on the steps. The room opened up into a low-ceilinged chamber, lit by pale electroplasmic light. Around a large table, four men had been deep in conversation—Lannic Morrow himself, flanked by Adrian Blackwood and Silas Thorn, with Arthur now stepping back to his seat. They looked up as we entered. Lannic was the first to move. He rose from his chair with a smooth, practiced ease, his burned skin catching the light in a way that made the damage impossible to ignore. The scars were old, worn into him like the weathering of a monument—ugly, but carried with a kind of pride. His smile was disarming, almost warm, as he crossed the room to greet us.

“Ah, the new Crows from Crow’s Foot,” Lannic said, extending his hand first to me, then Jack, then Harry. His grip was firm, his eyes sharp, measuring each of us in turn. “Welcome. I’ve heard about your recent… accomplishments. Quite the stunt you pulled at the race.” Harry beamed at that, and Jack’s smirk practically took over his face. I kept my own expression neutral, watching Lannic’s body language for any tells. Too much friendliness in Doskvol was usually a mask for something else. “We’ve got a job,” Lannic continued, turning back toward the table and gesturing for us to follow. “But before I explain, a little context. These—” he gestured to the scars running along his jaw and neck “—are what I call war scars. The Cyphers have been in open conflict with the Ember Circle for years now. They’ve tried to burn us out, crush our operations, and buy off our allies. We’ve given as good as we’ve got.” That drew a glance from Adrian, who’d been leaning against the table until now, watching us with the faintest trace of a scowl. I didn’t miss how his eyes lingered on Jack longer than the rest of us. It was Jack who broke the moment. “Hold on,” he said slowly, pointing a finger toward Adrian. “You. You were in that balloon during the race.” Adrian’s mouth twitched, but it wasn’t a smile. “Sharp eyes. Yes. And I remember you. Vividly.” His tone made it clear that whatever memory he had of Jack, it wasn’t fond. Jack tilted his head, clearly weighing whether to grin or play it cool. He settled for a faint smirk and stayed quiet.

“As I was saying,” Lannic continued, not missing a beat, “this upcoming task is not one I hand out lightly. If you agree to help, you’ll be putting yourselves in direct conflict with the Ember Circle. They are already less than pleased with you after your… aerial performance.” Arthur leaned forward slightly, his voice calm but firm. “Truth is, you’ve already drawn their attention just by walking in here. Associate with the Cyphers, and you’re on their list. No way around that.” That made Harleena speak up. She had been quiet since we arrived, eyes taking in the details of the room, the people, and every shadow in the corners. “Then I want to know,” she said, her voice steady, “how much danger are we talking about here?” For a moment, Lannic

studied her as if deciding whether she was ready for the answer. Then he leaned forward, both hands flat on the table. “There’s a word traveling through the alleys, whispered in corners. The Gloam Sisters have declared open season against you. Not just trouble—they’re offering a reward for you. Dead or alive.” Harry stiffened at that, the smile gone. Jack’s smirk faded, replaced by a flicker of something more calculating. I just listened, filing it away. “And you all need to understand,” Lannic went on, his tone losing its warmth, “the Gloam Sisters are not just another gang. They are the most dangerous, most entrenched power in Doskvol’s underworld. Their reach is longer than you think. If you want to survive what’s coming, you’ll need allies in this city. Strong ones. Because without them… you won’t last long.” The room went still. The only sound was the faint hum of the lanterns, like the city itself was holding its breath.

The silence after Lannic’s warning sat heavy in the air, like smoke that refused to clear. I could see Jack’s mind working before he even spoke—his eyes narrowed just a fraction, his smirk slowly curling back into place. When he finally stepped forward, his tone was calm, but there was that familiar edge of performance to it, the kind of voice he used when he wanted everyone in the room to believe he was in control. “In that case,” Jack began, resting a hand casually on the back of a chair as if we were all just discussing the weather, “we’ll take the job. But there’s one condition—if the Crows stand for the Cyphers today, the Cyphers stand for the Crows tomorrow. If the Gloam Sisters, the Ember Circle, or any other charming lot comes knocking, I expect to know we have friends worth the trouble we’re about to get into.” It was a neat little speech, I’ll give him that. No bluff in his voice, either. He wasn’t asking; he was setting terms. I didn’t say anything, but I didn’t need to. From where I stood, I could see how Harry’s eyes lit up a little, the faintest grin tugging at the corner of his mouth. He liked the sound of it—liked the idea of the Crows having big-name allies. Harleena was harder to read. Her gaze flicked from Jack to Lannic, to Arthur, back to Jack. If I had to guess, she wasn’t sold on the idea of jumping headfirst into another war just because Jack said so. But she didn’t speak against him either. Maybe she was weighing the odds and figuring she’d be outvoted anyway.

Lannic didn’t hesitate. He nodded once, slow and deliberate. “Fair enough. You help me with this, and I’ll make sure you’ve got the Cyphers at your back when you need us.” He let the weight of that promise hang in the air before leaning back slightly. “Besides… you’ve already done good work for me.” He turned his eyes to Jack—there was something sly in them now. “Those blueprints you acquired? They’ve already paid off. I improved on the design, refined the flaws, and now we’ve built something… remarkable. A working prototype.” My brow twitched. He wasn’t speaking like this was some lucky haul. This was pride talking. Investment talking. Lannic’s voice lowered a fraction, more for dramatic effect than secrecy. “We’ve tried to move one of these machines out of Doskvol before, but the Ember Circle intercepted us. It was a… costly failure.” From beside me, Harleena’s voice cut in, steady and skeptical. “So, was there a mole? Someone feeding them your plans?” Lannic met her eyes without flinching. “No. I trust my people. Completely. There was no betrayal—just bad luck and a very determined enemy.” I wasn’t entirely convinced, but if he believed his crew was airtight, that was his business.

“This time,” he continued, “I want the Crows to help move the second prototype. Get it out of my grounds, deliver it to Gaddwick Train Station. I’ve already arranged for it to be picked up there. Easy task.” Easy. In my experience, that was the most dangerous word in the city. “How exactly are you planning to move it?” I asked, because that was the part that mattered. It was Adrian who answered, his tone carrying that easy charm of his. “Funny thing—something you said at The Shadow's Den actually gave us the idea. Two identical carriages, both reinforced to carry the load. One is the real deal. The other is completely empty. A decoy.” Harry leaned in with interest. “So which one’s the distraction?” That’s when Lannic smiled, and it wasn’t the friendly one from earlier—it was the smile of a man who enjoys the game more than the prize. “That’s the beauty of it. Nobody will know. Not the Circle, not the Imperial Polices, not even you. Only I’ll know which carriage carries the real machine. You’ll be moving both.” Jack chuckled under his breath. “So we’ve got a fifty-fifty chance of delivering the real thing without even knowing it.”

“Fifty percent of a guaranteed delivery,” Lannic corrected smoothly. “More or less.” The room was quiet for a heartbeat. No one said it out loud, but we were all thinking the same thing: this wasn’t going to be as easy as he was making it sound.

Chapter 6: **A Daring Mission: The Prototype's Journey - Part 1**

The day of the move arrived quickly, faster than Arthur could ready his thoughts or steady the restless coil in his chest, and suddenly it was upon him like a wave he couldn't step aside from. The night stretched black and endless above them, a strange moonless void where, for a rare moment, the stars burned sharp and clear as if the heavens themselves had remembered to exist again. It was beautiful in that cold, distant way, but beauty never lasted in Doskvol. Within minutes the sky was already dimming, swallowed under the crawling shroud of coal smoke belched from the factories and the salt-heavy breath of the harbor drifting in from the docks. Adrian stood beside Arthur in that thin slice of clarity, both of them staring up as though looking for something written in those pale pinpricks of light. His companion's silence felt loaded, heavy, until finally Adrian muttered through tight lips, "This is not a great sign." Arthur turned toward him, one brow raised, his voice as dry as the gravel under their boots. "I thought you believe in luck above all, Adrian." But Adrian didn't laugh or quip back as he usually would; his jaw shifted like a man biting back a truth, eyes shadowed, his silence filled with something he didn't dare spill into the night air.

The grinding rumble of wheels soon cut across their quiet moment, the sharp snorts of horses fogging white in the air as the carriages rolled closer to the canal-side meeting point. The noise was ugly and loud, iron rims clattering against cobblestones, but to Arthur it sounded like the first notes of a dirge. Two wagons loomed from the dark, their silhouettes almost indistinguishable—broad frames reinforced beneath with hidden steel, plain enough to pass for fishmongers' loads or oil merchants' stock. Yet he knew better, and so did everyone gathered here. One of those wagons carried a future that could redraw the city's balance of power, the prototype Lannic guarded so jealously, while the other was nothing but clever deceit, an empty lure meant to bleed the Ember Circle of their resources. To Arthur's eyes, the pair looked like twin beasts crouched in the fog, their fates tethered together, each waiting to be hunted down. Somewhere out there in the unseen dark, enemies were already stirring, ready to pounce. He could almost feel their anticipation prickling against his skin, the memory of fire and screaming steel from the last attempt still carved sharp in his mind. That night had been chaos, the Circle striking with such precision it was clear someone had fed them every step of the plan. Too many bodies had bled out, too many chances wasted, and the first prototype had ended in cinders. Arthur's lips pressed into a line. They couldn't afford another failure. Not tonight.

Arthur and Adrian stepped forward as the convoy ground to a halt, their boots crunching on grit and half-frozen mud at the canal's edge. Lantern-light caught their faces in harsh glimmers, the glow bouncing off Adrian's pale features and Arthur's darker, more guarded expression. They approached the others waiting there, figures stepping out of the murk like pieces of a puzzle sliding into place. Lannic was first to meet them, his tall frame draped in that ever-calculating calm, a man who held secrets close and carried them like armor. Silas Thorn stood not far from him, his posture taut and precise, the sort of soldierly stance that suggested every angle of the street had already been measured for range and cover. Arthur's gaze lingered on Silas a moment, reading the cool readiness there, then flicked back to Lannic, whose eyes betrayed nothing but that sly confidence Arthur had learned to distrust. As they exchanged greetings—brief, muted, without warmth—Arthur felt the undercurrent thrumming beneath it all. The weight of betrayal still unaccounted for, the suspicion that tonight's moves might already be compromised, the knowledge that he, alone, was carrying more truth than the others realized. And somewhere deep in his gut, he knew it wouldn't be long before the night revealed which part of their fragile plan was destined to burn.

Arthur was thoughtful again, and the weight of it pressed behind his eyes like a headache that refused to fade. He couldn't help it. The conversation with Lannic from the night before kept

circling back, looping through his mind in fragments, each word heavier in memory than it had been in the moment. Lannic had come to him late, long after the lamps should've been extinguished, seeking him in the shadows away from the others. That alone had been enough to set Arthur's nerves on edge—Lannic never singled anyone out, never let his mask of calm camaraderie slip. To the crew he was the careful patriarch, every man and woman treated like kin, his voice smooth, his hand steady. But in the hush of that midnight talk, he had broken the pattern. "Someone is leaking our secrets, Arthur," Lannic had said, the words quiet but sharp, as though he feared the walls themselves might betray him. "There is someone inside the Cyphers feeding information to the Ember Circle." Arthur had felt the weight of it immediately, a truth too ugly to deny, and his reply had been measured but certain: "It makes sense this is the case. But Lannic… surely you don't distrust Silas or Adrian, right?"

The memory sharpened as if etched on steel. Lannic's face had been unreadable in the lamplight, his tone cautious to the point of unnatural. "I don't… don't distrust." The pause had cut too long, the repetition too deliberate, and Arthur had caught it like the sour note in a song. It was evasive, slippery in a way Lannic never was, and it had rattled him. Arthur had pressed, steady and searching: "But you trust me?" For the first time, Lannic had smiled, though even that had been thin, almost reluctant. "We are friends for such a long time, Arthur, that you could not possibly lie to me." The words should have reassured, yet they felt like chains—binding, expectant, too sure of his honesty. Arthur had nodded in agreement, but inside something had twisted. He had forced himself to add, "It could be anyone in our operations. Including the newbys." And then, like the strike of a hammer, Lannic had answered, "Yes. Anyone." That word, that final note, still echoed in Arthur's ears, a blade balanced over every conversation since.

Arthur had watched Lannic drift into silence then, as if lost in some private labyrinth of thought. The quiet between them had been thick enough to choke, and Arthur had felt it slice through him, an unspoken suspicion heavier than any accusation. He carried that moment with him now, tucked like a shard beneath the ribs, impossible to ignore. The night air stank of coal and brine, the damp fog clinging to his coat, yet all he could hear was that single word—*anyone*—like a curse whispered in the back of his skull. He tried to shake it, forcing his eyes back to the present, to the rhythm of boots on cobblestones and the low murmur of men at work. But his mind returned to it, circling again and again, a loop that refused to break.

Drawing a slow breath, Arthur steadied himself, forcing his features back into composure as he rejoined the threads of small talk among Adrian and the others. His answers came automatic, the shape of his words smooth enough to pass, but beneath it all his thoughts were elsewhere, still measuring every flicker of expression, every shift in tone from those around him. The mistrust that had settled in his bones made every glance feel heavier, every silence more dangerous. Adrian's laughter didn't ring as bright, Silas's calm felt rehearsed, and even the creak of the carriages behind them carried suspicion, as if the wood itself knew something it shouldn't. Arthur forced himself to nod, to smirk, to play the part, but inside the question Lannic had planted was growing like rot.

The sharp clatter of wheels turning stone pulled him back, snapping his focus forward. The street bent and turned, the fog curling low, and Arthur saw them—shapes moving out of the mist, rounding the corner with the kind of easy confidence that made them stand out anywhere. The Crows. A ragged little knot of audacity and trouble wrapped up in human skins, their silhouettes unmistakable even at a distance. He watched them arrive with the same mixture of curiosity and irritation they always sparked in him, their swagger undeniable, their unpredictability like fire—bright, dangerous, impossible to control. Arthur shifted his weight slightly, boots scraping stone, his hand brushing the edge of his coat as instinct guided him to readiness. Whatever else the night would bring, it had now begun in earnest.

Lannic greeted the Crows with a small nod and handshakes all around, the kind of measured courtesy that could pass for warmth in a city that punished real tenderness. Jack's grin flashed and vanished like a card trick, Harleena's jaw stayed set as if she were biting down on a promise, Harry rolled his shoulders like a boxer walking toward the bell, and Rabbit's Foot inclined his head, eyes taking the carriages and streets apart piece by piece. Some of them looked nervous, some excited, and the mixture curdled into a bright, volatile energy that made the lanternlight feel too sharp on the edges. Their names were beginning to run along the gutters of Doskvol, catching on tongues in the Den and the docks and the alleys behind the gambling dens, and Arthur couldn't help hoping they wouldn't feel sorry for it later. The night air smelled of damp stone, oil, and smoke, the cobbles sweating with drizzle beneath the horses' hooves as if the city itself were bracing for a blow. Lannic kept moving, clasp to clasp, a glint of silver cuff catching the lamplight every time his hand turned, his gaze flicking with a craftsman's precision from face to face and back to the wagons. Outside the fog thickened and thinned in slow drifts, the faint salt tang pushing in from the harbor to set a tremor in the lantern glass. Arthur stood a half-step back from the circle, reading posture and footwork the way other men read ledgers, counting tells that might matter when the night sharpened. When Lannic finally took the head of the gathering again, the space hushed without a command, the quiet arriving like a curtain pulled across a stage.

He went over the plan briefly and quickly, the words clipped, the gestures spare, as if he were tightening bolts on a mechanism that had to work on the first try. To any casual observer, they were nothing more than cargo wagons—hauling crates of salted fish or barrels of lamp oil. The carriages looked tired and honest under their weather-darkened panels, wood scuffed and iron ring-bolted, the kind of wagons that never made anyone look twice. Beneath the slats, hidden bracing winked like ribs, and fresh grease cut a clean line through the pervasive stink of coal, fish, and wet rope. Lannic's finger traced routes across the map spread on a crate in crisp arcs, each line a corridor of risk and timing rather than streets and stones. His voice neither rose nor hurried, but the pulse in his throat beat visibly when he spoke the words *intercept*, *decoy*, and *station*. Arthur watched the others breathe as the plan fell into place, something like resolve taking shape in the tension around mouths and the way coats settled over shoulders. A faint rattle from a nearby harness clocked the seconds between sentences, turning the briefing into a metronome that made everyone stand a little straighter. By the time Lannic stepped back, the shape of the night had become a machine of moving parts, primed to jam or sing depending on how steady their hands stayed.

Inside one, however, sat the future, wrapped in steel and secrecy, heavy enough to tilt fate if not the wagon. The other was nothing but a hollow shell, a lure for the Ember Circle to waste themselves on, a paper body with a clockwork heartbeat that meant nothing and everything. Arthur felt the old bruise of their last attempt throb beneath his ribs, the memory of men going down in smoke and shouting while the first prototype died without a sound. The air seemed to grow colder a fraction when that thought touched it, a draft pushing damp fog across the wheels as if summoned by the word *failure*. He caught Adrian's eye for a breath, and there was the same flinty admission there—close call, ugly luck, not again. Lannic's features didn't move, but his mechanical finger clicked once against the crate, a quiet tic that landed like a vow he didn't dare speak. Decoys were lies you told the world, Arthur thought; the trouble was the world always answered back with one of its own. The wagons waited with the patience of beasts that didn't know they were walking into teeth, leather creaking, harness buckles cold and wet to the touch. Somewhere down the street a shutter slammed and echoed, and the faint taste of iron on Arthur's tongue told him blood would be in the night before the stars burned out.

Jack and Harleena would be the ones to take the wheel, driving the real—or perhaps the false—cargo through the streets, and they wore the assignment like gamblers accepting the deal. Jack's hands hovered over invisible reins as he listened, practicing turns in the air, while Harleena's eyes tracked the map and then the alleys, already charting choke points by instinct.

Their route was mapped to skirt the worst of Ashmere Hall’s bottlenecks and Brightstone’s patrol habits, cut with little streets only locals trusted and bridges that complained but held. Arthur would be their shadow, following close, ready to counter any assault with that blend of precision and resourcefulness he was known for, the role settling over him like an old coat. He pictured the distance he’d keep—far enough to be mistaken for coincidence, near enough to punch through an ambush before it closed, a ghost tied by a short leash. His horse stamped once, impatient, and he laid a calming palm on the warm neck, feeling the animal’s breath plume against his glove in quick, damp bursts. The thought of being the only one Lannic trusted with the truth about which wagon mattered slid cold and heavy into his chest, a secret he’d have to ride with and bleed for. He rotated his shoulder to loosen an ache that always woke on nights like this, hearing the quiet pop of the joint like a knuckle cracked before a fight. Across the circle, Jack caught his glance and gave a quick, crooked smile that said *we’ll improvise*, and Arthur answered with the barest tilt of his chin that meant *I know*.

Harry and Rabbit would split off, their job to follow with the second wagon in a path not by road, but by water—slipping into the darkness aboard a narrow, low-slung skiff built for speed and silence. The little boat waited by the canal steps like a blade in a sheath, tar-dark and mean, oarlocks muffled with wrapped cloth and a tarpaulin cinched tight over a compact load. Harry kept one hand resting on the hull as if feeling the current in advance, the other flexing with the memory of words that could harden skin or turn flame aside. Rabbit’s posture never gave much away, but Arthur watched the minute tilt of his head when Lannic mentioned patrol schedules, as if he could hear the gaps between whistles. The canals would carry sound strangely tonight, deadening shouts and throwing footsteps sideways, and the stink of algae would ride under the coal reek like a secret only the water kept. Fog would cling low and slick to the surface, masking wake and oar, while the skiff’s shallow draft let it kiss along brick and piling without complaint. It was a good plan, Arthur admitted, because it was two plans that looked like one, and that kind of misdirection tended to draw claws in the wrong direction. Harry shot him a quick nod across the wagon bed, a spark of reckless humor cutting through the tension, the kind that said he’d rather fight the night than try to sleep through it. Rabbit’s fingers ghosted over the paper like a dealer palming a card, and the lantern caught the bend of his mouth in a half-thought that might have been a prayer or a curse.

Adrian was to move ahead of the convoy entirely, partnered with Constant, who had arrived mid-briefing with his trench coat still wet at the hem and a cigarette riding the corner of his mouth like it had paid rent. The two of them would work in tandem to crack open any Ember Circle ambushes before they could snap shut, clearing the road with quiet precision or loud violence, depending on what the night called for. Adrian traced two short, neat crosses on the map with a pencil nub to mark likely choke points, and Constant tipped ash into the wet cobbles, smiling like a man who’d already been to both and left a rude note. Between them hung that easy, dangerous camaraderie that comes from walking away from the same bad odds a few times in a row, the kind that turned plans into dares. They spoke in low, overlapping currents, one voice all measurements and timing, the other a gravelly shrug that somehow made room for miracles. A chalk sigil would mean *stop*, a red slash across cobbles would mean *veer left*, and if neither appeared, it meant the street was lying and they’d improvise with explosives. Arthur watched the way Adrian’s eyes narrowed when he calculated travel time against response time, the little muscle that jumped in his cheek when he didn’t like the answer. Constant caught Arthur’s look and tipped two fingers off his brow, a lazy salute that felt like a promise and a warning wrapped together. When they broke from the carriages to check gear, their movements were brisk and practiced, two men packing like they were late for a funeral they intended to interrupt.

And above it all, watching the water like a hawk from some unseen perch, would be Silas Thorn, already a silhouette in Arthur’s mind against a rooftop ridge no one else had noticed. He had chosen his overwatch position earlier in the day, a spot that took the wind’s petty moods into

account and put three exits under his eye without exposing his shadow. The rifle he favored lay open across a cloth-draped crate now, its pieces gleaming with the pride of a patient killer, each screw tightened with a ritual seriousness that bordered on prayer. Silas didn't talk when he worked; he breathed, and the others adjusted themselves to the pace without meaning to, lungs matching the slow in and out as if he were teaching them. He would be the one to take the shot that kept Harry and Rabbit moving when the canal spat teeth at them, the one to break a noose an instant before it cinched. Arthur had seen him hold a sight picture through rain and smoke and the clamor of men dying close, had watched him lower the barrel afterward like a pen set gently on a final line. Tonight his eyes were bright and remote, as if he were already on the ledge, already counting heartbeats and measuring mirage in the lantern haze over black water. He touched the cheekpiece once with two fingers, a quiet superstition, then wrapped the rifle in oiled canvas that sighed like silk when it folded. No one wished him luck because he didn't believe in it, and the silence where the words might have gone felt like respect rather than neglect.

And Arthur would tailgate the convoy on the roads from a safe distance, covering the back and offering aid where needed, the invisible hinge the whole contraption would swing on if it started to come apart. He checked his saddle cinch twice, then the pistol at his hip, then the extra cartridges riding quiet in his coat pocket, the rhythm of inspection easing his mind into steadier lanes. The horses blew steam and stamped in place, iron rings chiming against bit and buckle, while the carriages creaked softly as if testing their own bones before the run. He took the measure of the Crows one more time and found the same thing he always found—bravado backed by grit, chaos wearing a grin, danger that might just be pointed the right way if someone kept a hand on it. Lannic's trust sat warm and heavy on him and colder than ice in the same breath, a responsibility that made his shoulders square even as it pulled at the corners of his mouth. He rolled his neck, felt the vertebrae line up, and let his breath out slow, tasting iron and soot and the faint sweetness of paraffin from a nearby lantern. The city around them hummed with the restless expectation that comes before a riot or a storm, windows dimming one by one as if the buildings themselves were choosing sides. Somewhere overhead a gull cried once and was gone, the sound knifed thin by the fog, and Arthur felt the night settle against his skin like a coat of wet wool. He told himself, as he always did, that plans held only as long as men did, and that his job was to make sure the plan outlived the first mistake.

The circle drew tight again as last checks began, buckles tugged, straps re-set, blades tested by thumbnail, and flares counted out and slipped into interior pockets with the intimacy of secrets. Lannic re-rolled the map and then unrolled it again, the paper's crackle carried by the damp night air, his ruined skin catching the lamplight and throwing hard planes across his expression. Jack stretched his fingers, then his neck, then laughed under his breath at nothing anyone else heard, while Harleena adjusted the lie of her coat to keep the rifle's weight balanced. Harry flexed his hands slowly as if coaxing heat into his bones, eyes half-lidded the way they got when he listened to the memory of incantations, and Constant's smoke drew a lazy figure eight before being swallowed by the fog. Adrian marked a final time on his pocket watch, snapped it shut with the satisfaction of a calculation landing true, and gave Arthur a quick, unshowy nod that meant *see you on the other side*. Silas passed without a word to the stair up the canal embankment, boots placing their sound exactly where the stone was strongest, a ghost already busy with heights. The wagons shifted as drivers climbed aboard, harness rings chimed, and somewhere a horse answered with a soft, nervous snicker that tightened Arthur's gut and steadied his hands. The canal mouth breathed cold mist up through the stones, bringing with it the slick scent of old water and rusted chains and the promise of dark lanes where a whisper could be a warning or a trap. Rabbit had his eyes on the map spread over a crate between the two wagons, noting the split routes and the intersections where timing would be most critical.

Arthur, Silas, and Adrian stood close together in the mist, the lamplight catching on their coats, shoulders almost touching as the sounds of last preparations clattered and hushed around

them. None of them needed words at first—the silence between them was thick with years of shared nights like this, close calls, and the kind of loyalty that never had to be spoken aloud. Adrian finally broke it, his voice smooth but edged with steel, like velvet stretched over a knife. “Well, lads, if this is the night we end up in the history books, let’s at least make sure they spell our names right.” He smirked, tilting his chin toward Arthur and Silas, though his eyes carried a flicker of seriousness he couldn’t quite hide. Arthur gave a low chuckle, the sound barely carrying over the creak of leather and iron, and replied, “I’d be happy enough if there’s anything left of us to spell at all.” Silas, quiet and measured as always, let the corners of his mouth twitch in what passed for a smile. “They’ll spell your names wrong either way,” he said in that calm, cutting tone, “but I’ll make sure there’s at least a body left for them to guess at.” Their laughter was brief, but real, breaking the tension like a knife through taut rope before it could snap.

One by one they reached into their coats, pulling out the small brass compasses that glinted under the faint glow of the street lanterns. Each man carried two that night, delicate instruments balanced in rough hands that had known powder burns and scar tissue more often than polish. Arthur flipped open the lids with a soft click, and as if alive, the needles pulled taut—one steady point drawing him toward Silas, the other toward Adrian. He watched as both of them revealed theirs as well, needles dancing briefly before locking into the same shared pull. “There,” Arthur muttered, his voice low, the words heavy with trust. “No matter what happens tonight, we’ll always find each other.” Adrian nodded, more solemn now, brushing his thumb across the edge of his compass like a gambler stroking a lucky coin. “No excuses for getting lost, then. If I fall behind, you’ll know. If I get ahead, you’ll damn well feel it.” Silas closed his lids with deliberate finality, sliding the instruments back into his coat. “And if either of you disappear,” he said flatly, “I’ll follow the needle until there’s nothing left but ashes.” For a moment, none of them spoke again, just the sound of horses stamping and the steady hiss of the tide against the canal wall filling the gap.

Arthur shifted his weight, feeling the solid reassurance of his weapons at his side, then clapped Adrian on the shoulder, the gesture firm, carrying more meaning than words. “Watch yourself, Blackwood. I know you’re fast with a plan, but don’t outthink your own feet.” Adrian’s grin widened, though his eyes betrayed the strain beneath. “Don’t worry about me, Xavier. If I’m going down, it’ll be because I chose the wrong drink afterward, not because of some Circle cutthroat.” Silas glanced between them both, his hand resting lightly on the rifle slung against his back, and added with that dry humor of his, “If either of you get yourselves killed, it’ll ruin my night. And I was looking forward to the quiet.” That earned another brief smile from Arthur, who answered, “You’d miss us, Thorn. You’d just never admit it.” Silas gave the barest tilt of his head, which in his language meant maybe, before turning his gaze outward to the fog as if to end the discussion. Adrian shook his head, muttering, “Same as ever. You two take life too damn seriously.” But he didn’t walk away, not yet, lingering like a man savoring the last warmth before stepping into the cold.

The minutes dragged long, each one weighed down by the knowledge that this was the last chance to stand together before splitting apart into their separate roles. Arthur looked at them both, memorizing the way the lantern light carved Silas into a shadow sharp and patient, the way Adrian’s posture gave him away no matter how hard he smiled. They had fought together, bled together, argued and nearly killed each other on bad days, but on nights like this they were more than comrades—they were the thin line that kept the city’s chaos from eating them whole. Arthur drew in a slow breath and finally said, “Good luck, both of you. If there’s luck left in this city, may it favor your corners.” Adrian clinked his compass lightly against Arthur’s before slipping it back into his pocket, saying, “Luck’s just timing in disguise. And I’ve got plenty of that.” Silas gave no toast, no gesture, only a long look that said more than any words could: *stay alive*. The three of them parted with that silent promise tethering them, more solid than chains.

Just before they could scatter into their separate duties, the sound of boots against stone pulled their eyes back to the wagons. Lannic stepped forward, his coat catching the lantern glow, his expression both warm and sharpened with purpose. He raised a hand, drawing the roomless silence of the street into his orbit, and began to speak. “Friends,” he said, his voice cutting through fog and clatter, “tonight we move more than a machine—we move a piece of the future. One of these wagons will reach Gaddwick Station. The other will lead the Circle astray.” He paused, letting the words hang, and his gaze lingered a fraction longer on Arthur, a spark of trust and weight that only Arthur seemed to notice. Then he allowed himself a sly smile, as if he were already enjoying the sleepless nights he’d given his enemies. “Which is which…” he let the words dangle, the silence daring them to question. “That’s for me to know, and for the Circle to lose sleep over. Your job is to make sure both keep moving until I have my prize safe on the other side.” His voice carried like steel across stone, firm enough to settle every restless twitch and quiet every doubt.

When the last syllable faded into the night, the group stirred, boots striking the cobbles as plans snapped back into motion. Harnesses were adjusted, reins tightened, lanterns dimmed low until their glow was little more than a breath in the fog. The two wagons shifted, horses pawing at the stone as if impatient to be unleashed, the weight of the secret cargo humming like a pulse under their wheels. Adrian adjusted his coat and gave Arthur a final nod before slipping toward Constant’s shadow, while Silas vanished into the mist above, already becoming a ghost of rooftops and rifled breath. Arthur stayed a moment longer, the compasses heavy in his pockets, before climbing to his horse and feeling the weight of the night press down on his shoulders. From here they would all diverge—different directions, different duties, different risks—but the same goal binding them together like blood in the veins of the city. The convoy would move, the Circle would hunt, and somewhere in the shifting dark, their paths would cross again. The night had begun, and it was already too late to turn back.

Arthur rode low in the saddle, the steady rhythm of the horse’s hooves echoing against the cobblestones like a muffled drumbeat, each strike swallowed by the heavy veil of fog that clung stubbornly to the streets. He kept his distance, careful to maintain that fragile space where he could see the wagons yet not appear tethered to them, a shadow trailing shadows. The city this late was hollow and quiet, its usual chaos reduced to the occasional echo of laughter from a distant tavern or the scrape of shutters closing against the cold. Too much company on the road would be suspicious, but too little made every noise stand out, every shape in the dark a potential threat. His eyes flicked constantly from alley to alley, fingers brushing over the pouch tied to the saddle—small tools, sharpened wires, glass vials filled with substances he prayed would remain untouched. He felt their weight against his palm, both comfort and curse. It was never a good night when you counted on those to see you through.

The wagons ahead shifted pace, slowing as if the air itself had thickened around them. Arthur leaned forward slightly, narrowing his eyes. Jack’s silhouette at the reins shifted, Harleena’s figure leaning close to the side, both of them tense, their bodies sharp against the lantern glow of their carriage. Something had caught their attention. Arthur straightened in the saddle, eyes darting further down the street where shadows gathered unnaturally. He recalled Adrian’s earlier words, his calm assurance that if trouble came, they would know before it struck. A signal. Always a signal. Arthur tightened his grip on the reins, heart thumping as he searched the stones ahead for any sign of warning.

Then he saw it—the smear of red across the cobbles, jagged and uneven, stark even under the pallid lantern light. Adrian’s handiwork, no doubt, laid down with Constant as they scouted ahead. It was the promised mark, the unspoken declaration: danger. Arthur felt the muscles in his jaw tighten, the weight of inevitability settling into his chest. He drew in a slow breath through his nose, exhaled just as slowly, then lifted his fingers to his lips. A low, sharp whistle cut the

fog, not quite a bird and not quite a man, a half-breath call he had practiced a hundred times in the dead of night. The sound drifted upward, vanishing into the thick clouds above the rooftops.

The reply came almost instantly—two short, cutting caws from the darkness above, the sound carrying a sharp edge that made Arthur's skin prickle. He tipped his head back, catching just the faintest outline of wings against the murk of the night. Silas' crow. Some swore the creature was just a bird, well-trained and loyal, but others whispered it was something more—an extension of Silas himself, a familiar with eyes that saw beyond what flesh should. Arthur had never pressed him for the truth. Some things were better left unasked. But now, those two caws brought him a strange kind of relief, as if Silas himself had leaned close to whisper confirmation in his ear: *Yes, trouble waits. Be ready.*

Arthur shifted in the saddle, tightening the strap of his holster, every sense sharpening under the weight of the signal. His gaze swept across the fog-thickened road, the shapes of doorways, the looming silhouettes of chimneys, the too-still stillness of the alleys. He knew ambush when he felt it—the way the night itself seemed to tense, waiting for the first move. He leaned down, murmuring to the horse, feeling the animal's ears flick nervously at his voice. "Steady now. We'll ride this line together." The horse snorted, pawing the ground once before quieting, as if understanding what was to come.

His hand slipped back down to the bag of trinkets tied against the saddle, thumb tracing the edge of a small vial capped in wax. Too soon for that, he told himself, but the comfort was in knowing he was not unarmed, even against enemies who preferred the shadows. His other hand brushed across the compass in his pocket, feeling the faint pull of its needle, the steady direction that anchored him to Silas and Adrian alike. They were close. They were ready. Arthur sat taller, drawing a slow breath as he let the fog curl around him like a cloak. He would wait for the strike. But not blindly. Not this time. The Circle wanted them to walk into the jaws, but Arthur had seen the teeth glinting in the dark.

Arthur's eyes narrowed as the shapes on the road resolved into uniformed figures, their gaslamp lanterns cutting pale arcs through the fog. Three—no, four of them, boots planted square in the middle of the cobblestones, rifles slung casually but with that unspoken readiness only the Imperial Police carried. The officers' hands lifted in unison, palms out, the universal gesture to halt. Arthur felt his pulse kick against his ribs. This wasn't some random patrol. They were watching this road, stopping every soul that passed. The question gnawed at him as his horse slowed beneath him: *why here, why now?* These streets were not a natural choke point, not the sort of place where bribes flowed easy from smugglers. No, this had a stink to it. Someone had placed them here. Someone had known.

He tugged lightly on the reins, easing his horse back into the mist's shadow, close enough to watch but not so close as to draw the wrong eyes. The creak of the wagon ahead groaned louder in the still night as Jack slowed the reins, Harleena sitting rigid beside him, her profile sharp with suspicion. Arthur's fingers brushed against the butt of his pistol, a reflex more than intent. They could not—*must not*—inspect the carriage. Lannic's voice from the night before pressed against his thoughts like a hammer on an anvil: *The real prototype rides in that wagon, Arthur. Only you and I know it. Guard it with your life, because if they look inside, the whole city will start asking questions we cannot afford to answer.* Arthur's throat felt tight, a film of sweat cooling against his neck despite the night's chill.

The officers moved in with practiced indifference, one man flipping through forged papers with that cold stare that belonged more to a hawk than a human being. Another circled the wagon, the butt of his rifle knocking idly against the boards as though daring them to betray their secret. Arthur could see Jack's posture shift, casual to the untrained eye, but to Arthur it was a mask, every muscle wound taut beneath his coat. He leaned forward slightly, speaking low to the

officer with words Arthur couldn't hear, but the cadence was smooth, calculated, the rhythm of a man spinning truth and lies into a rope strong enough to climb. Harleena didn't blink, didn't twitch, but her hand stayed hidden just under the fold of her coat, poised above steel.

Arthur exhaled only when the officer finally stepped back, brow furrowed but hand lifting in permission. Jack flicked the reins, guiding the horses forward with a cool detachment, the carriage creaking past the checkpoint without so much as a crate lifted or a board pried loose. Arthur's chest unclenched slowly, the tightness draining from his shoulders in one long, unseen release. He nudged his horse into a steady trot to follow, trying to look every inch the detached rider with no stake in the passing convoy.

As he approached, one of the officers waved him through with little more than a glance, uninterested, the sort of lazy dismissal that meant Arthur was just another shadow in the fog. Yet his eyes caught on one man among them—the taller of the group, shoulders squared, his expression slack in a way that didn't fit the sharp alertness of a true checkpoint. His gaze flicked oddly, unfocused, as if the world around him were slipping like sand through his fingers. Arthur knew that look. He had seen it before. That was no fatigue, no drunken weariness on a late shift. That was tampering. Memory bent, maybe broken. Jack's handiwork.

Arthur's jaw tightened, his gaze flicking briefly toward the retreating carriage wheels up ahead. It was clever, yes, but dangerous. Memory tampering left traces, echoes, ripples in places they could not control. It made enemies who would not even understand *why* they hated you. In a city like Doskvol, enemies were the one currency no one could afford to inflate. He shifted in his saddle, muttering under his breath, the words dissolving in the mist. "You're playing a bold game, Crows. Just pray the house doesn't take it all back." His horse snorted, hooves striking sparks against the stone, and Arthur pushed onward, the red smear of Adrian's warning mark still lingering in his mind like a heartbeat against the road ahead.

Arthur's eyes narrowed as the carriage jolted sharply left, wheels shrieking against wet stone as Jack snapped the reins. Harleena leaned into the turn, her body rigid but steady, her face unreadable even at that distance. They weren't supposed to be on this street. Arthur knew the plan by heart—the exact alleys Adrian and Constant had scouted, the lanes meant to minimize exposure. This was no part of it. For a heartbeat, his gut twisted with irritation, ready to curse them for reckless improvisation. Yet as his horse's hooves struck sparks from the cobbles, carrying him after them, he knew instinct was sometimes the only blade sharp enough to cut through Doskvol's night. Still, this turn carried them into blind ground. No markers. No scouts ahead. Just faith in chaos, and Arthur didn't have the luxury of trusting chaos.

He urged his horse forward, leaning low in the saddle, cloak whipping in the damp wind as he strained to keep the carriage in sight. The air was shifting here, colder, heavier. Fog thickened unnaturally fast, rolling down from the rooftops like some great grey curtain being dragged across the sky. Arthur's hand brushed the trinkets tied at his belt, fingers lingering on the small iron charm etched with protective runes, his breath caught in recognition. Manufactured fog. He had seen the Circle conjure this before—thick, clinging smog laced with chemical bite, enough to choke the lungs and blind the sharpest eyes. This wasn't the city's natural poison. This was a weapon. His jaw tightened as he whispered a curse under his breath. "They're here."

Through the shifting haze, faint outlines flickered—movement where there should have been stillness. Two shapes slipped down the slanted rooftops, their motions too smooth and deliberate to be common thieves. Cloaked men, boots slapping against stone, landing with the low thud of trained killers. The glint of steel caught the thin lamplight as their hands pulled reins taut, mounting horses with fluid desperation. Circle soldiers, unmistakable in the way they carried themselves—too quick, too disciplined, every movement honed for pursuit. Arthur's stomach knotted, because the trap had been set, neat and ready, and the Crows had swerved

into improvisation so wildly that they had evaded it without even knowing. Their unpredictability, reckless as it was, had saved them from the jaws of the net. For once, he found himself admiring their chaos.

Arthur leaned forward in his saddle, heels digging into his horse's flanks, forcing the beast to surge faster down the narrowing street. Hooves clattered against slick cobbles, the sound bouncing between tall walls of brick and iron. The Circle riders were already spurring after the Crows, the fog curling around them like loyal dogs. Their silhouettes vanished and reappeared, emerging from the mist in lunges of speed, each stride closing the distance between predator and prey. Arthur's grip on his reins was iron-hard, his free hand brushing across his pistol before settling on the hilt of the blade strapped to his thigh. The carriage's lantern flickered dimly through the haze ahead, just bright enough to guide him. He wouldn't let the Circle close the distance. Not tonight.

The fog carried sound strangely, muffling the grind of wheels, stretching the snorts of horses until they sounded like beasts exhaling from the depths of nightmares. Arthur's own horse began to foam at the bit, its muscles straining, coat darkened with sweat beneath his knees. His heartbeat thrummed with the rhythm of hooves, his breath quick and sharp, every sense tuned to the shifting dark. He saw one Circle rider level a crossbow as his horse leapt forward in the mist, the faint gleam of a bolt ready to fly. Arthur snapped the reins, pulled tight, and his horse lunged left, aligning him for the chase. The night roared in his ears, the smell of salt and coal-smoke mixing with the strange chemical tang of the Circle's conjured fog. He lowered his body, eyes locked forward, the chaos of the Crows' choice pulling them into danger—and giving him his chance to strike before the Circle's trap could close.

Arthur snapped his arm up, revolver glinting faintly in the shifting fog as he pulled the trigger with the precision of someone who had rehearsed this moment a hundred times in his head. Silence and stealth were useless now; the night had already cracked open into violence. The first shot hit home, punching into the shoulder of the lead soldier just as his crossbow string began to tense. The man cried out and twisted in the saddle, the force of the impact wrenching him sideways until he tumbled from his horse, hitting the stones with a sickening thud. The distraction was enough to throw the second man off his rhythm. His weapon wavered, the bolt slicing past the carriage harmlessly into the fog. Ahead, Arthur heard Harleena's voice tear through the mist, sharp and commanding, the kind of voice you obey without hesitation. "Jack, distract him!" Her words carried with the wind, urgent and edged with the steel of someone who had stared down too many death traps to flinch now. Arthur strained to see through the smoke and distance, but their figures blurred in the haze, swallowed by the chaos unfolding on the street.

Then came the pain. Sudden, raw, and white-hot. A sharp impact tore into Arthur's arm, a bolt grazing the muscle high on his bicep. The sting flared like fire racing under his skin, his hand instinctively snapping to the wound as the world tilted sickeningly. His breath caught in his chest, his body lurching forward as his horse reared in startled panic. The jolt pitched him sideways, momentum ripping him from the saddle. He crashed onto the cobblestones with a bone-rattling impact that knocked the air from his lungs and left his ears ringing. Grit bit into his palms, and the weight of the fog pressed down heavier than ever. In that blur of pain and confusion, realization struck cold: there was a third rider.

The scrape of hooves came fast and close behind him, too close, the rhythm pounding like war drums in his skull. Arthur forced his body to move, rolling onto his side, teeth clenched against the flare in his arm. His pistol was still in his hand—instinct had refused to let it go, even as he fell. The dark silhouette of the third soldier loomed through the mist, crossbow raised again, his horse charging hard, foam and sweat streaking its flanks. Arthur's instincts flared into focus. No

time to think, only to act. He snapped the barrel up, aiming not for the man but for the beast beneath him.

The shot cracked like thunder in the alley, reverberating off the walls and cutting through the fog. The bullet slammed into the horse's side, and the animal let out a piercing shriek of pain, its muscles convulsing violently. It reared high, forelegs striking at the empty air, eyes rolling white in terror. The soldier shouted in shock, clutching desperately at the reins as his balance wavered. Then the inevitable: the horse twisted and bucked, throwing him from the saddle with brutal force. His body hit the ground hard, the dull, wet sound of flesh and stone colliding echoing in the night. The rider rolled once before coming to a painful, jarring stop, weapon skittering across the cobblestones into the fog.

Arthur's breath came in sharp bursts, sweat mixing with the blood slicking his arm as he pushed himself onto one knee. The sting of the graze hadn't dulled—it pulsed with every heartbeat, a fiery reminder of how close death's hand had come. His horse was gone, bolted into the night, its hooves fading into the distance. That left him crouched in the damp street, fog curling around him like smoke from an unseen fire, body aching but resolve burning hotter with each inhale. He raised the pistol again, aiming at the soldier sprawled before him, unwilling to give him a chance to recover. The man groaned, fumbling weakly toward his crossbow, fingers slipping on the wet stones. Arthur's voice, hoarse but steady, cut through the silence like a blade. "Don't."

The word held all the weight of the night, the tension of secrets, the fury of betrayal yet to be revealed. His finger tightened slightly on the trigger, eyes locked on the soldier's every twitch. Behind him, faint and muffled through the mist, came the sound of the carriage still rolling, wheels rattling, horses snorting, the Crows pressing forward toward streets darker still. Arthur forced air into his lungs, forcing the pain aside. There was no time to falter. Not now. Not with the prototype still in play and the Circle pressing from every shadow. He pressed his boot against the soldier's chest, forcing him down, revolver steady in his bleeding hand. "Stay where you are," Arthur growled, his jaw set, his eyes dark and unyielding. "I've already put one of you in the dirt tonight. Don't make me add another."

The soldier lay sprawled in the gutter for only a moment, his chest heaving as he sucked in the smoky night air. Then the fury in his eyes reignited, a blaze that refused to be snuffed out. With a guttural snarl, he twisted his arm free, hand darting into his coat to draw a pistol of his own. The flash of steel caught the glow of the street lamps just long enough to warn Arthur before the shots rang out. Two sharp cracks split the night, sparks flying where lead chewed into stone. Arthur dove sideways, boots scraping on the slick cobbles, shoulder grinding against the wall of a soot-stained tenement. Dust rained down around him, the scent of scorched brick stinging his nose. His pulse thudded heavy in his ears, every muscle screaming at him to move, to stay alive.

From his pocket Arthur yanked free a trinket, the old reliable Crawly, its familiar weight warm against his palm. He pressed the tiny latch carved into its side, the mechanism clicking open with a metallic snap. Legs unfurled, spindly and jointed like some nightmarish insect wrought from brass and gold, catching the faint lamplight as they stretched. With a flick of his wrist, Arthur set it loose. The device skittered across the cobblestones in quick, darting motions, skimming over puddles of rainwater, its little gears whirring in sharp whispers. Each step was precise, uncanny, a predator hunting its prey in miniature. The soldier's eyes widened for a split second, then narrowed again, teeth bared in defiance as he braced.

Instead of panic, the man raised his arm, and Arthur's gut clenched when he saw what came out: a small, ugly contraption strapped to his forearm, its nozzle gleaming dully, tubes feeding from a tank on his back. A pocket-sized flamethrower. The man let out a roar as he squeezed the trigger, and fire bloomed in a violent arc, the night itself swallowing in orange and red. The

air seared with heat, singeing the damp fog into choking steam. The Crawly vanished into the blaze, its golden shell glowing white for an instant before exploding, a muffled detonation buried beneath the roar of flame. Shards of brass rained down uselessly, scattering like broken teeth across the stones. Arthur shielded his face with his arm, the sting of the heat licking his skin.

“Ha ha ha! Try again, scum!” the soldier bellowed, his voice harsh and ragged, carried on the crackle of fire. He stepped forward out of the haze, the madman’s grin illuminated by the weapon still dripping with fire like some infernal torch. The taunt rattled through the street, half-laughter and half-snarl, a sound of cruel triumph. Arthur’s jaw clenched, teeth grinding against the humiliation of seeing one of his most trusted trinkets turned to ash. He raised his revolver again, snapping off quick shots, not aiming to kill but to pin the bastard down. Bullets sparked against stone, ricocheting into the night, forcing the man to duck behind the smoldering shell of an overturned cart.

Arthur didn’t waste the distraction. His legs pumped into motion, boots slapping hard against the cobblestones as he broke into a desperate sprint. His breath came sharp and ragged, his wounded arm screaming in protest with every jarring step. The soldier fired wild in return, muzzle flashes cutting through the haze, but Arthur moved like a shadow between cover, ducking low, slipping in the gaps. There was no time for another gadget, no chance for distance. This fight would end only one way. Gunfire and fire had proven unreliable in this choking maze of smoke and stone. Only fists, bone, and willpower would decide who walked away.

Arthur lowered his shoulder and charged, the weight of his body behind every step, ready to crash into the man with the kind of force only desperation could muster.

Arthur crashed into the man with the force of a battering ram, their bodies slamming together in a tangle of limbs and rage. The flamethrower clattered sideways against the stones, its hiss dying in the night as Arthur’s shoulder drove the soldier back. They grappled, boots scraping across slick cobbles, each man straining for dominance in the narrow space between walls and overturned crates. The soldier swung first, a savage hook that caught Arthur across the jaw, teeth rattling with the impact, copper blooming on his tongue. Arthur grunted, his head snapping aside, but his grip didn’t falter—he shoved forward, forcing the distance closed, giving the bastard no room to raise another weapon.

The soldier snarled and kneed him hard in the ribs, the air blasting out of Arthur’s lungs in a hiss, his wounded arm screaming in protest. Arthur answered with a brutal elbow to the man’s face, the crunch of cartilage sharp and wet as blood spattered down the soldier’s chin. They staggered together, locked in a savage dance, fists hammering wherever there was flesh exposed. The man drove a knuckle into Arthur’s gut, folding him for a breath, but Arthur returned it with a crack across his temple, his knuckles splitting from the force. Both men staggered, panting hard, sweat and blood mingling as their chests heaved like beasts straining against the leash of survival.

Arthur knew the soldier was strong, but not a trained brawler. His swings were fueled by fury, wild arcs that aimed to break rather than disable. Arthur ducked one such swing, feeling the rush of air graze his hair as the man’s fist cracked against the stone wall, the sound of bone smacking brick. Arthur didn’t waste the opening. He surged upward, ramming his forehead into the soldier’s nose with a sickening crunch, stars flashing in his own vision even as the other reeled backward, dazed. Blood poured freely now, the man’s snarl gurgling into something wet, but he still swung, still clawed, still fought to drag Arthur down with him.

The fight turned dirtier as they fell against the ground, rolling in the muck and grit of the street. Arthur pinned one arm and threw his weight down, the soldier writhing beneath him, spitting curses into his face. He felt knuckles slam into his ribs, felt nails claw at his coat, but none of it

mattered now. He smashed his fist again and again, each blow jarring through his arm, each impact duller as the man's resistance waned. The soldier spat blood into Arthur's cheek, eyes blazing with hatred even through the haze of pain. Arthur answered with one final swing, a brutal right hook that snapped the man's head sideways against the stones, leaving him limp and motionless beneath him.

Arthur knelt there for half a heartbeat, chest heaving, vision blurred with sweat and pain. The stink of burnt oil and blood hung in the air, his hands trembling from exertion. But there was no time to linger. He staggered upright, wincing as his bruised ribs flared, and wiped the blood from his mouth with the back of his sleeve. His eyes scanned the darkened street until he spotted the flash of movement—his horse, spooked but not lost, reins dragging as it pawed nervously at the far end of the alley. Arthur broke into a ragged sprint, boots pounding, every muscle screaming at him to keep moving. He seized the reins, hauled himself back into the saddle with a grunt of effort, and turned the animal's head toward the smoke and echoes of battle ahead. The convoy was out there, moving, vulnerable, and Arthur could not—would not—let himself fall behind.

Chapter 7: **A Daring Mission: The Prototype's Journey - Part 2**

Ashmere Hall's narrow streets wound like a maze built to suffocate, pressing in close with every rattling turn of the carriage wheels. The gaslamps burned low and mean, throwing long, needle-thin shadows that stretched and shivered with the fog. Jack's grip on the reins was taut, his shoulders hunched forward as if willing the horses to run faster, while beside him Harleena scanned the dark with sharp, restless eyes, her gaze darting to every rooftop and alley as though each held a waiting knife. The air carried a weight that thickened with every breath, colder with each block, and then the first sign came—Jack felt the Spiritbane charm in his pocket grow hot, pulsing against his thigh like a dying heartbeat. A warning. The kind a man ignored only once. His knuckles went white around the leather. "Something's coming," he muttered, the words nearly swallowed by the rattle of wheels.

The warning came too late. A shrill whistle tore the night apart, followed by the wet, brutal sound of an arrow sinking deep into the flank of a lead horse. The animal screamed, a ragged and broken sound, before crashing mid-stride onto the cobbles. The carriage lurched violently, wood groaning under the sudden strain. Jack's curse caught in his throat as a second arrow slashed through the fog and buried itself in the other lead horse. Blood sprayed, and the beast collapsed in a twisted heap, dragging the rig into a careening skid that rattled every bolt and board. And then the fog shifted—and something stepped forward that should never have existed.

At first glance it might have been mistaken for a rider, some wretched man astride a mount, but the wrongness of it struck like a hammer. Into the sickly yellow light of the nearest lamp came a creature stitched together in blasphemy: the bottom half a black stallion's corpse, its hide peeled and sutured crudely with tar-thick lines, patches of fur missing to reveal rotting muscle. The top half was a man's torso, skin grey and sagging, the mouth hanging open with teeth gone black. Its chest was fused to the horse's body with grotesque seams, like a butcher's work done in darkness. One arm jutted at an impossible angle, bone showing through torn flesh, yet it moved with a steady, deliberate menace.

A shiver carved its way down Harleena's spine. She had seen horrors in Doskvol, horrors men whispered of in back alleys, but this was something fouler, something against nature itself. Only deep sorcery could bind such carrion into motion. She didn't need to think hard to know the hands behind it. The Gloam Sisters. The name alone sent a cold weight through her chest. If the Sisters stood with the Ember Circle, if they had joined hands in this night's work, then the job before them had become more than a task. It was open war. Two of the city's most entrenched and feared powers, aligned against them in the same moment. The thought made her throat tighten.

Jack's reaction was different. Where Harleena felt ice, he felt fire. Rage flashed in his eyes, a sudden and merciless spark. "They knew," he growled, voice low but trembling with fury. His mind raced, wheels turning, conclusions snapping into place faster than reason should allow. "They knew we'd be here tonight." His grip tightened on the reins, the leather creaking under his hands. "That means there's a mole." His jaw set hard, but the thought spiraled, hungry and unresolved. Who among them had betrayed their path? Who had sold the night?

The undead centaur loosed a sound that belonged to no living thing, neither horse nor man—a rasping hiss, wet and broken, that vibrated in the marrow like a curse spoken through bone. Then it lunged forward. Jack snapped the reins hard, forcing the crippled carriage to stagger backward, its wheels shrieking but holding together by some miracle. Harleena was already moving, rifle slung from her shoulder with a fluid pull, her hands steady even as the night

trembled around them. She slammed an electroplasm round into the chamber, the weapon humming with a trapped storm as she brought it to her shoulder.

The first shot struck square into the centaur's equine chest. Blue fire licked across dead flesh, arcs of lightning crawling like veins under its skin, forcing its muscles into violent, twitching spasms. It reeled, staggered, but did not fall. Still it came, the weight of its charge shaking the cobblestones. Jack cursed under his breath, fumbling at his belt until his hand found a pouch. He ripped it open and hurled a cloud of flash powder into the monster's face. The night bloomed white, the fog itself glowing for an instant as if the city's soul had flared awake. The abomination jerked its head back, blinded, its advance faltering.

That instant was all Harleena needed. Her second shot split the air, aimed not for the body but for the skull that lolled grotesquely atop the stitched torso. The electroplasm detonated on impact, a blinding crack followed by a spray of black ichor that hissed where it struck stone. The undead thing screamed, a final shriek that sounded like two voices tearing each other apart, before collapsing in a grotesque tangle of flesh and bone. Its limbs twitched and convulsed even in death, electroplasm burning through it like fire eating parchment.

The street fell silent again. The stink of ozone and rot hung heavy, mingling with the smoke of Jack's spent powder. Their horses lay in bloody heaps, still and broken, the carriage scarred but upright—alive only by stubborn luck. Harleena dragged the back of her glove across her mouth, steadying her breath, but her hands trembled despite her will. Jack stood at the reins, his jaw set, eyes fixed down the empty street where the fog still rolled like restless spirits. His voice was low, almost a growl. "If they wanted to scare us," he muttered, "it worked."

Arthur followed only moments after Jack and Harleena, his horse's hooves still striking sparks from the cobbles as he pressed forward through the smothering fog. Contrary to his intent, he slowed, then reined to a halt, the chase after the carriage slipping from his grasp as another pull seized him. He dropped from the saddle with a grunt, boots hitting stone, and let the reins fall loose as his gaze fixed on the ruin lying broken across the street. The stench struck first, a fetid mix of rot and scorched hair that clung to the back of the throat. Arthur lifted his sleeve to his face and forced himself closer, the lantern light guttering across a shape so grotesque it twisted even his weathered stomach. The thing sprawled there was no beast that should walk Doskvol's streets. A horse's body, great and black, the head hacked away at the stump of the neck. In its place, sewn into the flesh with obscene care, was the upper half of a man. The stitches were neat, almost professional, thick black thread pulling dead skin tight against dead hide. The human torso was grey and sagging, lips peeled back from blackened teeth, a parody of life held together by someone's patient cruelty.

Arthur crouched low, gun still warm in his hand, his breath caught in his chest as he studied the corpse. The creature's wounds bore the familiar mark of gunfire—round holes punched through hide and muscle—but not a drop of blood seeped from them. The flesh was already dry, already dead, the color long since drained away. He prodded the side of its chest with the barrel of his revolver and recoiled at the way the skin sagged and cracked, like parchment stretched too thin. The smell thickened the closer he leaned, a sour rot cut with a metallic tang that made his eyes sting. He forced himself to look closer, to mark the stitching where horse and man met, where rot had been bound into function by some cruel precision. The meat was days old, the decay obvious, and yet Arthur could see the tracks stamped deep into the mud around it—hoofprints and boot marks, the frantic scrape of a skirmish. Despite its state, the abomination had been walking these streets only moments ago. Walking, and firing a bow with enough force to kill horses mid-stride. His gut twisted cold with the realization: Jack and Harleena must have brought it down, though not without risk.

He held his breath and turned his face aside, willing his lungs to stay empty against the foul air. The stink clung to him anyway, worming into his coat, his hair, the pores of his skin. He swallowed against the urge to gag, his teeth clenched tight, as his eyes swept the street beyond the carcass. The fog rolled heavy, lantern light struggling against it, the night smothered in an oppressive hush. That hush broke, faint at first, the sound slipping from the edges of hearing like whispers behind a locked door. Then came the rhythm—footsteps, not the steady stride of men, but a pounding rush that vibrated the cobbles beneath his boots. His head snapped up, eyes straining against the dark, and shapes began to move just beyond the reach of the light. At first three, their twisted outlines flickering as if the fog itself resisted revealing them. Then four. Then seven. Too many. Far too many.

The things ran with a jerking momentum, grotesque silhouettes tearing at the corners of his vision, their malformed frames flickering in and out of sight with the roll of the fog. The same warped fusion of man and beast, legs driving like pistons, torsos bent forward with bows in hand, though none of them should have been able to breathe let alone chase prey. Their hooves struck like hammers, rattling against the stone, their motions purposeful, relentless. Arthur froze for a heartbeat, revolver raised, every muscle tight with the instinct to fight. But there were too many, more than he could ever hope to cut down alone. The seven monsters did not turn for him. They surged past the edges of the street, vanishing one after the other into the black haze, all of them following the same path—the road Jack and Harleena's carriage had taken. The Crows were their quarry now, hunted by nightmares stitched from death itself.

Arthur's pulse thundered, his body taut with both dread and clarity. His instincts had already told him what his reason now confirmed. There was only one faction in all of Doskvol who could summon such horrors from the grave, who would dare twist flesh and spirit into something so grotesque and wrong. The Gloam Sisters. The realization slid down his spine like ice water, setting every nerve alight. If the Sisters were working hand in hand with the Ember Circle to intercept this convoy, then the stakes had already vaulted beyond smuggling or secrecy. This was war in all but name. Arthur's jaw set, the cold weight of understanding settling in his chest. The Crows had drawn the attention of two of Doskvol's deadliest powers at once, and now they were being hunted through the streets by abominations that no sane world should bear. The fog swallowed the pounding hoofbeats, leaving Arthur in the dark with only the corpse at his feet and the knowledge that the city itself was about to bleed.

Arthur kicked hard at the stirrups, the horse lunging forward with renewed speed, his cloak snapping like a torn banner behind him. Every hoofbeat jarred his wounded arm, but he forced the pain into the corner of his mind and drove himself onward. This time there was no strategy, no careful trailing of the convoy—this was desperation given form, his chest tight as if iron bands were clamped around his ribs. He did not ride after the carriage, nor did he head for Gaddwick Station itself, where the wagons were supposed to meet their destiny. His path curved east, still in the same neighborhood, the streets narrowing around him as the fog pressed close. He rode as if the darkness itself were snapping at his heels, repeating the same silent plea in his skull with every pounding stride: *please, stay out of this… please, girls, stay home…* The words were not thought so much as prayer, raw and pleading, each one carried on the rhythm of his horse's hooves.He had prayed the girls would stay home, but deep down he knew better. They had her fire.

The houses here were modest, brick and timber sagging with the weight of salt and smoke, their shutters drawn tight against the night. Arthur's breath plumed white in the air as he finally reached the low iron gate of the house he sought, a place so painfully ordinary it could have been mistaken for any of the hundreds scattered across the district. His heart pounded against his ribs, dread already rising like bile in his throat as his eyes caught on the front door—wide open, swinging slightly in the draft. The sound creaked across the silent street, and his blood

ran cold. He yanked the reins, the horse skidding to a halt in the mud, its breath steaming heavily. And then she appeared.

From the doorway came a woman, running with her cloak flying behind her, her face pale and stark in the lantern glow that leaked from inside. She had sharp, delicate features, her dark hair spilling around her shoulders in disarray, her lips pale but pressed with fierce resolve. Her garments were plain, yet the way she carried herself had a severity about it, as though the night itself bent to her presence. Her hand rose, trembling, fingers curled as if she had been about to cast some ward or clutch at something unseen. Smoke seemed to cling to her, faint wisps curling from the doorway behind, ghostlike in their suggestion. Arthur's breath hitched, not just from the sight but from the sound—her voice split the night, desperate and raw, carrying such weight that the hairs at the back of his neck bristled instantly.

"They are gone!" she cried, her words slicing through him with the finality of a blade. Her eyes, wide and fierce, locked onto his with a command as sharp as fear itself. "Gone already. Go! Find them! I'm right after you!" She didn't falter, didn't break into tears as others might have. Her desperation was a weapon, turned outward, driving Arthur like a lash. For an instant, he nearly flung himself from the saddle, some instinct to reach her, to question, to cling to any explanation. But there was no time. He saw in her eyes that she knew more than she said, and that hesitation now would damn them all.

Without a word of argument, Arthur leaned low from the saddle, his hand snapping down to seize the object she thrust out toward him. A pair of glasses, unremarkable at first glance, their frames plain, glass lenses catching only the faintest glint of lamplight. He felt the weight of them, deceptively ordinary, but heavy with meaning. He didn't ask, didn't need to. She placed them in his hand with a trust so absolute it burned. He met her gaze, voice hoarse but steady, speaking the only words that mattered. "I will find them." His tone left no room for doubt, the vow more binding than steel or ink.

He tightened his grip on the reins, the horse stamping impatiently as though sensing the urgency that poured off its rider. With a sharp kick, Arthur wheeled the animal around, the glasses gripped firm in his hand, the night swallowing him once more. His heart roared in his ears as the fog tore past, every stride pulling him closer to Gaddwick Station, closer to the blood and fire waiting for him there. Behind him, the house loomed silent, its door yawning wide, and the woman's figure faded into the mist. Arthur did not look back. The city was shifting, its shadows alive with enemies and horrors, and the only choice left was to gallop headlong into the storm.

Arthur rode hard, the station rising through the fog like a dark crown of soot-stained steel and broken glass, its outline jagged against the dim glow of scattered lamps and the pale ghost-light of the moon. Even from a distance, he could hear it—the chaos, the cacophony, the screams of men and beasts twisted into something worse. As his horse thundered closer, the night opened up into a scene that made his gut seize tight. Gaddwick Station had become a battlefield. The streets churned with violence, shadow and fire clashing in waves, the acrid tang of burning pitch stinging his nose as smoke drifted thick through the arches. He reined in sharply, chest heaving, his wounded arm throbbing in time with his racing heart, and for a moment he sat frozen on the edge of it, staring into the living nightmare the Gloam Sisters had conjured to bar their way. His breath caught in his throat as the sheer scale of it sank in. This was not an ambush. It was war.

Constant was at the heart of it, impossible to miss even through the smoke. His long coat was ripped and burned in a dozen places, the once-clean white of his shirtfront charred and riddled with holes where flames had licked too close. His hair clung damp to his brow, plastered by sweat, and a thin ribbon of blood traced down the edge of his jaw, glistening in the firelight. Yet none of it slowed him. His eyes blazed, alive with that mad, dangerous glint Arthur had seen

before—the look of a man who thrived when death pressed closest. Constant moved with an impossible precision, weaving through the hell around him like smoke slipping through cracks. Each step was a taunt, each strike a dare to fate. Arthur's stomach twisted with equal parts dread and awe.

The abomination Constant faced was a thing of nightmares, its body stitched together from what should never have met. The upper half was the dried husk of a man, its skin taut and grey, eyes milky with death, its mouth sealed by a butcher's crude stitches that tugged at the skin like black spider legs. Below, the bloated carcass of a warhorse heaved beneath it, ribs punching through decayed hide, every movement jerking with unnatural rhythm. Its hooves struck the stone like thunder, each impact shuddering up Arthur's bones, sending ripples racing across the puddles that mirrored the chaos in fractured light. When it swung its arm—a grotesque, stiff-limbed arc—Constant ducked fluidly beneath it, knife flashing in the firelight.

But the centaur was not his only enemy. The second creature was worse, if such a thing could be imagined, as though the Sisters had taken delight in seeing how far they could twist nature's rules. It lunged in crooked movements, a grotesque hybrid of ape and carrion bird, its torso bulging with mismatched muscles, skin stretched thin over bones that did not belong together. Two great blackened wings sprouted from its back, one mangled and crooked, the other beating hard enough to whip the smoke into frenzied swirls. Its head was a horror of feathers and fur, a twisted beak clacking open and shut with shrill, piercing cries that scraped down Arthur's spine. Its talons slashed wildly, scoring sparks from the cobbles, and its stench was so thick Arthur gagged on bile. When it lunged for Constant's throat, the man twisted, driving his blade deep into its flank. Blood erupted black and thick, splattering the ground and streaking Constant's face, but still the creature screeched, thrashing with furious life.

Arthur's horse shifted under him, hooves restless, ears flicking back at the chaos, and still he stayed astride, frozen for a heartbeat too long. Desperation swelled inside his chest, hot and suffocating. He wanted to leap into the fray, to throw himself against the tide of monsters and scream his fury into their rotten faces, but the truth clawed at him—he couldn't waste himself blind. There was something he had to find. Something more important than his rage. With shaking hands, slick from sweat and blood, Arthur pulled the glasses from his pocket, slipping them over his face. They felt heavy, colder than glass should against his skin, the world shifting the instant the lenses settled before his eyes.

The battlefield sharpened unnaturally, every detail screaming alive. He saw the threads of spirit energy bleeding from the undead as they clawed and stumbled, veins of pale fire weaving through their broken bodies. He saw the shimmer of wards painted into the cobblestones by unseen hands, glyphs that twisted the fog and bent light into illusions. And through it all, he scanned with frantic precision, turning his head in sharp, jerking motions, ignoring the clash of blades and the guttural shrieks. His breath rasped, loud in his ears, as his eyes cut across the chaos. Somewhere here, in this storm of monsters and steel, was what he had come for. Somewhere in the smoke and blood was the reason Lannic had entrusted him, the reason that woman had pressed these cursed glasses into his hands. Arthur's fingers tightened on the reins, his teeth grit hard enough to ache, and he whispered to himself through clenched jaw, "Where is it…?" The words bled into the night, swallowed by the roar of the war that raged ahead.

Arthur's breath hitched when the lenses flared, the world shifting into sharp, unnatural clarity. Smoke bent away like torn cloth, the battlefield's blur of fire and steel unraveling into strange truths only the glasses would allow. And there—darting like a streak of ghostlight through the carnage—he saw it. A goat, or rather the shimmer of one, its edges translucent yet stubbornly solid as it slammed into a soldier's chest and sent the man sprawling as though struck by a cannonball. The creature bleated, the sound sharp as a blade in Arthur's skull, and though no

one else seemed to hear it, the effect was undeniable. Men and monsters alike staggered, their movements thrown into chaos. Arthur's lips parted in disbelief before curling into a grim smile, and a single word escaped him on the rasp of his breath, half curse, half relief. "Biscuit."

Sliding down from the saddle, his boots hit the cobbles with a thud, knees bending as his hand instinctively sought the grip of his pistol. The battlefield swallowed him at once—shadows darting, bodies thrashing, the clang of steel and the wet crunch of fists and bone mixing with screams that rattled the air. Arthur ducked low, weaving through the chaos, eyes fixed on the spectral goat as it bounded between lines of men, its horns crackling faintly with pale, unnatural light. A soldier in Circle black caught sight of him, lunging forward with a jagged knife, face contorted in fury. Arthur shifted his stance and met the man head-on, his pistol snapping up with practiced precision. One shot echoed, smoke bursting from the barrel, the flash lighting his face for a heartbeat. The soldier dropped, weapon clattering against the stones, and Arthur pressed forward without breaking stride, boots skidding over blood-slick cobbles.

The goat bleated again, its ghostly form ramming into the flank of an undead centaur, and the abomination lurched sideways, staggering into its own allies. Arthur pushed harder, lungs burning as his legs carried him through the storm. A new threat rose in front of him—a twisted thing with the torso of a man and the wings of a crow, feathers blackened and dripping with tar. Its screech sliced the air as it dove low, talons raking where Arthur had been an instant before. He threw himself sideways, rolling across the stones, feeling claws scrape sparks where his head had just been. Grit dug into his palms, his wounded arm flaring with pain, but he forced himself upright with a growl, shoving forward again, sweat stinging his eyes.

Everywhere the fight pulled at him, tried to swallow him whole. Flames from a broken lantern licked at a wagon's shattered wheel, the acrid smoke mixing with the stench of death until his throat seized with each breath. Men clashed to his left, steel on steel, one scream ending in a wet gurgle. A creature screeched to his right, its body convulsing as Constant's blade tore through it. Yet Arthur's focus never wavered. He pressed between the flailing chaos, a ghost of his own among the frenzy, slipping past death again and again by inches. His eyes locked onto Biscuit, that impossible goat weaving through battle like a spark in the dark, scattering foes who never quite understood what struck them.

The closer he came, the stronger the sense of strangeness grew, as if the glasses revealed not just the goat but something larger—a thin shimmer that seemed to ripple outward from Biscuit with every strike, distorting the air like heat over stone. Arthur clenched his jaw, forcing himself onward, teeth bared in effort as he shoved a corpse from his path. He vaulted over a toppled crate, ducked beneath the swing of a blade he hadn't seen coming, his heart slamming against his ribs as if it too wanted free. He was no longer just chasing a ghost; he was chasing the only ally in this nightmare who seemed untouchable, the one force tearing holes in the Circle's careful ambush.

And with every bleat that echoed like thunder inside his skull, Arthur knew—whatever madness had birthed this strange companion, whatever secrets tied it to the chaos unfolding—it might be the only thing keeping the Crows alive long enough to finish this fight. And for the first time that night, he felt not just desperation clawing at his chest, but the sharp, dangerous edge of hope.

Arthur's voice cut through the chaos, ragged and sharp as he bellowed the name with everything left in his lungs. "Biscuit!!" The battlefield seemed to stutter for the briefest instant, the spectral goat halting mid-charge, its ghostly form turning in a slow, deliberate motion, glowing eyes fixing on him with uncanny clarity. Before Arthur could even move toward it, another voice struck him from above—a shrill, high-pitched scream, carried by laughter and desperation all at once. "PAPA!!" The word sliced into him, freezing his blood, the sound too

small, too innocent to belong in a place like this. His gaze snapped upward, darting past the swaying smoke and the jagged rooflines until he saw her—tiny, fierce, impossible.

She was leaping on the edge of a rooftop, her frame slight, no taller than a child of seven should be, her narrow shoulders draped in a riot of colors stitched into a ragged rainbow-striped cape that fluttered wildly in the night wind. Her dark hair was pulled into a messy tail that whipped around her face as she jumped up and down, both hands raised high as if to pull the entire world's eyes onto her. Her expression was fierce and unyielding, her brows drawn in concentration, but her mouth split wide in a grin that showed both teeth and defiance. One small hand clutched what could have been mistaken for a toy—a simple wooden spoon, the handle worn smooth, its surface etched faintly with runes that shimmered when it caught the lantern glow. That spoon, Arthur knew, was no toy. It was her weapon, her charm, her secret thunder. She waved it in the air as if daring the whole battlefield to come for her.

Arthur felt a weight in his chest loosen for just a second, a sigh of relief breaking past his lips despite the smoke clogging his throat. She was alive. Against all odds, in this hell of fire and corpses and stitched-together abominations, she was alive, shouting his name as if it was the most ordinary day in Doskvol. But there was no time for tenderness here, no time for the pull of blood and bonds. He forced himself to turn from her, jaw set, eyes snapping back to the goat that now stood as still as stone, its pale form burning faintly against the shadows. The battlefield blurred around them, muffled under the weight of the moment, as if all else could wait for his next words.

"Where are your sisters?" Arthur demanded, his voice low but sharp, each syllable edged with urgency. His throat was raw, but the question came like a command, a plea hidden beneath it. His eyes locked on Biscuit's, waiting, needing, while in his periphery he could still see the small figure on the roof, hopping and waving, her spoon flashing in rhythm with her laughter. She was close enough to see his mouth move, close enough to hear his words through the chaos, and he knew that every word he said to the goat was for her too. He could not fail them. Not here.

Biscuit's spectral form shifted, its head jerking once, sharply, in a gesture so deliberate it left no room for doubt. The motion carried purpose, almost human in its clarity, a silent answer carved into the smoke. The goat pawed once at the ground before bolting, its hooves leaving no sound but its glowing form streaking forward like a shard of broken moonlight. Arthur's heart lurched, his muscles already moving, boots pounding the cobbles as he spurred himself after it. His horse still stomped nervously where he had left it, but Arthur didn't waste the heartbeat it would take to mount. He ran, the battlefield folding around him into a single path.

Lilo's laughter rang above him one last time, bright and reckless as she leaned so far over the roof's edge he thought she might topple. She waved the spoon like a banner, the cape behind her catching the light of a nearby fire, burning colors into the night as if mocking the darkness. Arthur's jaw clenched, his eyes forward, and his mind repeated the silent vow that had carried him this far: he would find them. All of them. Whatever trap or terror lay ahead, he would not lose another child to Doskvol's shadows. Biscuit's ghostly glow led the way, and Arthur followed, never slowing, never looking back.

Biscuit tore through the chaos like a phantom wrecking ball, lowering its horns and smashing into anything in its path—Circle soldier, twisted beast, or even ally—it didn't matter. Everything fell aside, bodies stumbling, curses flung into the night, as Arthur forced himself through the hole it carved. His boots struck sparks on the cobbles as he pushed harder, lungs burning, eyes locked forward. In the blur of firelight and smoke he caught glimpses of the Crows, Jack swinging from the side of the wagon with that careless swagger even in battle, Harleena's rifle booming arcs of lightning, Constant a storm in human form—but Arthur didn't slow. His blood pulled him elsewhere. The goat led him to a narrow side door of the Gaddwick Station, the wood

splintering inward as Biscuit slammed through with spectral force, the hinges shrieking in protest. Arthur followed, gun raised, heart in his throat.

The room inside stank of sweat, iron, and old wood, the dim lanterns barely holding against the chaos. And there she was. The girl was no child—seventeen, tall and wiry, her frame clad in dark leather fitted to allow for both stealth and sudden violence. Her hood shadowed her sharp features, but her eyes burned bright and calculating, every flicker of movement weighed and measured even in the blur of combat. Silver nail earrings glinted faintly in the lantern glow with each turn of her head, catching the light like sparks from a blade. She was locked in a desperate fight with two Ember Circle soldiers, one driving her back with a jagged blade, the other circling to strike from behind. Her movements were sharp, but already her stance showed strain, her breath ragged, the odds stacked against her.

Arthur's voice cracked with urgency as he turned on Biscuit, his words coming like a command forged of desperation. "Lilo, find your mum! She is here somewhere. Find her!" The goat froze, its glowing eyes flicking toward him, and Arthur read the body language instantly—the sudden pause, the faint hunch of its shoulders, the guilty tilt of its head. To anyone else, it was nothing. To Arthur, who knew her soul as if it were stitched to his own, it screamed her thought clear as day: *oh, I'm in trouble*. With a spectral kick, Biscuit spun on its hooves and bolted back the way it had come, vanishing into the haze.

Arthur drew his pistol, firing once, the shot ringing like thunder in the close air. One soldier staggered back, the bullet grazing his arm, enough to buy a breath of space. Arthur surged forward, colliding with the man like a battering ram, driving him into a support beam with bone-crunching force. But before he could finish the job, the girl cried out in shock, her voice ragged but sharp enough to cut through the din. "Hammerfall?" The word hit him harder than the soldier's blade ever could, the name like a ghost thrown back in his face. He snarled back, already straining against his opponent's knife, "Lita, get out of here!"

She ducked a blow, defiance burning in her voice even as she spun to parry with a stolen dagger. "Dad, in the field you have to call me—" Her protest cut short as Arthur, bleeding, furious, snapped back mid-struggle, his shout echoing through the rafters. "Nailspark, go!" The name rang like steel struck on steel. But instead of fleeing, she set her jaw, that same stubborn fire in her eyes that had marked her since birth. She dropped low, driving her blade up under the ribs of the second soldier, her voice rough with effort. "Not leaving you!"

The fight devolved into brutal, close-quarters carnage. Arthur's pistol cracked against a jaw like a cudgel, his other hand driving a knife home as the soldier staggered. Nailspark twisted behind the other, cutting him across the leg to bring him down, her movements sharp and economical, honed in shadows and blood. Together they turned the tide, their strikes overlapping in practiced instinct, though they hadn't fought side by side in years. The last Circle soldier gasped, his weapon clattering against the floor as Arthur hammered his fist into his face, once, twice, until the body went slack. The silence after was broken only by their heavy breathing.

Arthur wiped blood—his own, theirs, he couldn't tell—from his mouth with the back of his hand, chest heaving as he turned toward her. Nailspark stood there, blade still raised, her hood fallen back to reveal the sweat on her brow, her eyes blazing with the thrill of victory and the anger of recognition. The moment held them locked together, soldier and Silvernail. The Circle's corpses lay sprawled around them, but neither moved yet. The fight was over, but the war had only just followed them inside.

Arthur's voice cracked as he turned to Nailspark, words spilling out ragged with fear that had been building in his chest since the moment he'd seen Biscuit run. "Where is Vanta Bloom?" The urgency in his tone carried the weight of both a father and a soldier, every syllable sharp

enough to cut. Nailspark's eyes flicked toward the far door, her arm raising in a swift, sharp gesture as she started to answer, "Through there, she—" Her words were swallowed by the crash of wood and iron as the doors exploded inward, the figure of a girl hurled through them like a ragdoll tossed by some monstrous hand.

Arthur lunged forward, instincts older than reason carrying him to catch her before her small frame struck the floorboards. His arms closed around her, and for a heartbeat all he felt was how light she was, too light for someone who carried so much rage and responsibility in her eyes. Vanta Bloom's crown—once gleaming blue like starlight—sat crooked on her head, one of the crystalline points cracked from the force of the blast. Her cropped hair was matted with sweat and dust, but it was the gash at her forehead that made Arthur's stomach clench. Blood ran in thin rivulets down her face, dark against the pallor of her skin, catching on her jaw before dripping onto the black leather of her bone-etched armor. Her storm-colored eyes fluttered, dazed, barely able to focus on him.

Her lips parted, the single word rasping out as though it cost her everything she had left. "Hammer… fall?" The sound of it nearly broke him, her voice laced with both recognition and disbelief, a child reaching for the myth. Arthur's throat tightened, and his answer came out more like a plea than anything else, desperate, almost begging her. "Please… go home, what are you doing here?" His grip tightened on her shoulders as if he could anchor her to safety with nothing but strength of will. For a moment he forgot the battle raging outside, forgot the Circle, forgot the Sisters. All that existed was this bloodied, broken girl in his arms.

Behind him, a deliberate clearing of the throat cut through the moment. Nailspark, hood pushed back, her face set in a mix of exasperation and grim urgency, spoke with the voice of someone who had no time for sentiment in the middle of hell. "Erm… Hammerfall. We have bigger problems right now." Her tone carried the sharp edge of command, but there was a flicker of sympathy beneath it, the reluctant acknowledgment that she too felt the sting of this reunion but couldn't allow it to consume them.

Arthur lifted his head, jaw tightening, following the line of Nailspark's gaze toward the shattered doorway. Light still flickered and pulsed beyond it—unnatural, searing, too bright to belong in a place of shadow like Doskvol. The floor trembled faintly beneath their feet as another surge rippled through, carrying with it the acrid stench of electroplasm and burnt flesh. Shapes writhed in the glow, indistinct but monstrous, moving with the jerky cadence of things stitched together from death. He shifted Vanta Bloom in his arms, pressing her gently toward Nailspark as his own hand went for the weapon at his belt, every nerve in his body screaming readiness.

The three of them stood on the edge of something larger, the open doors framing their next trial in searing light. Behind them lay blood and corpses, ahead of them only chaos and the unknown. Arthur's heart pounded against his ribs, torn between shielding his daughters and throwing himself headlong into the fire. The name they called him, the name he had long buried, hung between them like a brand. Hammerfall. It was no longer a ghost of the past. It was who he was now, whether he wished it or not.

From the doorway came a glow that was not light but hunger, the kind of heat that made the air itself tighten in Arthur's chest. Out of the smoke walked Emberwing, second in command of the Ember Circle, and the reason half of Doskvol whispered prayers before lighting their lamps at night. His boots struck the stone floor like the tolling of iron bells, each step leaving a smear of soot and sparks in its wake. The firesuit he wore was a grotesque thing—an iron carapace slick with burn marks, leather boiled black, straps digging tight against a body built to carry tanks of pressurized death. Hoses curled from his back like mechanical snakes, pumping fuel with a wet, pulsing rhythm. The mask completed the horror: twin lenses glowing molten orange, alive with

reflections of the flame that hissed and spat from the nozzles in his gloved hands. He looked less like a man and more like a walking furnace given legs and hatred.

The hiss of burning fuel filled the station, a constant reminder of the destruction waiting at the crook of his fingers. Emberwing tilted his head slightly, the dull orange glow in his lenses catching Arthur full in the face as though the mask itself were studying him. When he spoke, his voice came muffled and warped, filtering through the respirator with a mechanical rasp that made the words crawl across the skin. “Ah, Arthur,” he said, almost conversational, but with the slow cadence of someone savoring every syllable. “Finally… a known face. Tell me then, would you mind explaining who are these annoying bitches that won’t leave me alone tonight?” The casual venom in his words was worse than rage, because it carried the weight of a predator already certain of the kill.

Arthur crouched and laid Vanta Bloom gently onto the ground, his hands trembling just enough that only someone watching closely would notice. Her small body sagged against the stone, her crown slipping further to the side as blood ran down from her forehead into her eyes. She blinked weakly, dazed, her gaze flicking up toward her father as though still unsure if this was truly him or just another hallucination born of pain. Arthur straightened slowly, jaw tightening, and drew his pistol with the deliberate calm of a man who knew hesitation would cost lives. The metallic click of the weapon leaving its holster echoed like a defiant heartbeat against the hiss of Emberwing’s flamethrower.

Beside him, Nailspark adjusted her stance, sliding one boot back and squaring her shoulders with a cold precision that mirrored her calculating nature. Her eyes never left Emberwing, though Arthur could feel the heat of her unease, the slight flinch at each hiss of pressurized fuel from his tank. The shadows of the station seemed to crawl closer to the walls, shrinking back from the oppressive heat. In her hand, her blade caught the glow of the fire, the silver of her namesake earrings reflecting pinpricks of light like tiny stars fighting not to be extinguished.

Emberwing tilted the nozzle of his weapon slightly, letting a thin tongue of flame stretch toward the floor, crawling across the stone and licking at the edges of the doorframe. The smell of burning oil filled the air, sharp and choking, mixing with the iron tang of blood and dust already thick in Arthur’s nostrils. Every movement of the man radiated control, the slow precision of someone who believed the battlefield already belonged to him. His glowing eyes lingered on Arthur, then on Nailspark, then down toward Vanta Bloom’s broken figure, as though calculating which death would cut deepest.

Arthur’s body was a taut wire ready to snap. The weight of his pistol in his hand was cold and solid, but the heat radiating from Emberwing pressed against him like a wall. Behind the mask, the man’s muffled chuckle rolled out again, low and grating, as if he could already taste the fear rising in the room. For a moment the station was still, the battle outside muted, and all that remained was the hiss of fire, the sound of breath through the respirator, and the unbearable heat of an inferno waiting to be unleashed. Arthur and Nailspark stood shoulder to shoulder, weapons raised, while Vanta Bloom lay bleeding and dazed at their feet. Emberwing advanced one step further into the light, his lenses burning like the eyes of a demon, and the fight promised itself in silence.

The fight began with an explosion of fire and steel that shook the very walls of the station. Emberwing’s nozzle spewed a torrent of flame across the floor, forcing Arthur and Nailspark to scatter to either side as the air itself seemed to catch fire. The two Ember Circle henchmen lunged in from the smoke, masked and armed with jagged blades blackened by use. Arthur fired twice, the gunshots echoing like thunder in the enclosed space, one bullet grazing the shoulder of a thug, sending him stumbling, but not stopping his charge. Nailspark moved with ruthless precision, parrying a strike with her blade and twisting to slam her elbow into her attacker’s jaw,

the crack of bone cutting through the roar of flames. Yet Emberwing was already advancing, heat rolling from him in suffocating waves, the glow of his lenses never leaving Arthur as though marking him for the kill.

Arthur coughed as the smoke clawed at his lungs, sweat pouring down his brow, his shirt clinging wet to his back. He ducked low and tried to flank Emberwing, firing again at one of the henchmen who had regained his footing. The man roared and slashed at Arthur's arm, the blade biting shallow but enough to tear flesh and draw blood. Arthur grimaced, firing point-blank into the man's stomach, the recoil rattling up his arm as the henchman crumpled to the floor. He barely had a breath before the second henchman closed in, grappling him and slamming him against the wall, fists hammering at his ribs like iron mallets. Nailspark saw it and tried to intervene, but Emberwing cut her off with a surge of flame, the fire biting into her cloak and forcing her back. The scream she bit down echoed in her throat, muffled but sharp, her blade clattering once against the stone before she snatched it up again.

The second henchman bore down on Arthur, the man's breath rancid against his cheek, a knife flashing in the dim firelight. Arthur twisted desperately, headbutting him, hearing the crunch of cartilage, but the blow only enraged the brute further. He fought with the desperation of someone cornered, his pistol now a useless weight at his side, pinned beneath the man's strength. It was Nailspark who saved him, her blade carving a deep line across the henchman's back, forcing him off Arthur with a howl. She spat a curse, her face slick with soot, eyes burning with defiance as she pulled Arthur to his feet. They stood together again, shoulders brushing, but even united, they were being pushed back step by step, the oppressive heat searing their skin and the relentless onslaught of Emberwing pressing them toward the edge of defeat.

Emberwing let out a muffled laugh, his voice grating through the mask as he unleashed another plume of flame, sweeping across the floor like a tide of burning oil. Nailspark dove forward, rolling across the stones to stab upward at his arm, her blade scraping metal with a teeth-jarring screech, but sparks rained harmlessly off his armor. He retaliated with a savage kick, catching her in the ribs, sending her crashing against a pillar with a cry that echoed in Arthur's bones. Arthur fired again in desperation, bullets sparking off Emberwing's mask, but the man barely flinched, his glowing eyes fixed on him like a predator savoring the moment before the kill. The heat grew unbearable, the smoke thick, every breath a knife in his lungs, and Arthur knew they were losing.

The final blow came swift and merciless. Emberwing surged forward, his gauntleted fist slamming into Arthur's chest with the force of a hammer, sending him sprawling across the floor. Pain ripped through his body, his vision bursting with stars, his pistol skittering out of reach. He gasped, clutching at the stone, trying to drag himself up, but his strength betrayed him. Emberwing loomed above, nozzle raised, fire dripping like venom from its maw, ready to consume him whole. Arthur's eyes fluttered, his body refusing to obey, the taste of blood on his tongue thick and metallic.

But then—through the haze, through the fire and screams—he saw it. Biscuit. The spectral goat burst through the door, a streak of ghostly light invisible to most, but blazing clear through Arthur's enchanted glasses. Its horns lowered, its phantom form barreling through soldiers and flame alike, scattering foes in a storm of spectral fury. Arthur's lips curled into a faint smile even as darkness claimed him. He knew Nailspark would not be left alone. Biscuit had come, and with Biscuit came hope. His final thought before the void took him was of her name, a single word that carried warmth against the suffocating heat. *Isadora.*

Arthur woke with a sharp gasp, his body jerking upright as though some nightmare had clawed him free of the void. His lungs burned with the sudden intake of air, and the pain from his wounds crashed into him like a tidal wave. His vision swam, the dim light of lanterns blurring before it steadied enough for him to realize he was not on a battlefield anymore. Instead, he was in a narrow, cluttered room of the emporium, laid out on an improvised bed of canvas and blankets. The faint smell of oil, burnt wood, and antiseptic hung thick in the air. Bandages bound his chest, his arm, even his temple—proof of wounds he didn't remember taking. His heart thundered in his chest as he tried to rise further, but before he could swing his legs down, a startled voice cut through the fog.

"Arthur, for god's sake!" Lannic's tone carried a mix of relief and exasperation, and the man shot forward from a stool where he'd been keeping vigil. His hands pressed against Arthur's shoulders firmly, trying to ease him back down. "This is no way to get up. You'll tear yourself apart. Calm yourself down before you undo all the work keeping you alive." His face was pale with exhaustion, the lines around his eyes sharp with worry, and yet there was still that steel in his voice—the same steel he always had when he demanded someone listen to him, even if it was Arthur. But Arthur's body fought his restraint on instinct, driven by something deeper than the pain. His eyes darted across the room, wild and searching, as though looking for shadows he feared might leap out at him.

"Are they safe?" Arthur's voice cracked, rough as gravel, the words torn from him as if speaking them hurt more than the wounds did. His hand shook as it gripped the edge of the cot, knuckles whitening, desperation bleeding into every syllable. Lannic froze, his brow furrowing in confusion, and tilted his head slightly as if he hadn't heard correctly. "Erm… who exactly are you asking after?" The question hung heavy in the air, and for a long heartbeat Arthur said nothing. His lips pressed tight, jaw locking, because he knew what the answer would cost him if he spoke too freely. Some things were better left unsaid. Some truths—his truths—were for him alone to carry. He looked down, the silence itself answering Lannic's question, and the weight of it thickened the air between them.

Seeing Arthur's wild energy ebb into something calmer, though no less heavy, Lannic finally moved. He picked up a small metal cup from a nearby table and pressed it into Arthur's trembling hands. "Here," he muttered, the sharpness leaving his voice, replaced by something quieter. "Water. Drink it slow." The cool liquid steadied Arthur's throat, his breaths beginning to even as he lowered the cup and let it rest in his lap. His eyes lifted again, this time not filled with unspoken secrets, but with another question clawing its way out. "Where are Silas, Adrian, Constant, and the others?" The names came heavy, his voice slower now, but no less filled with dread. He needed an anchor. He needed to know who still walked this earth.

Lannic's face changed the moment the words landed. The worry there deepened, folding in on itself into something harsher, heavier. His lips pressed into a thin line before he forced himself to answer. "Silas is fine. Conrad too. The others—some are bruised, battered, but they'll heal." He hesitated, his eyes flickering as though looking for a way to soften the blow he knew was coming. Arthur's heart sank at the pause, and his next question came quieter, stripped of any armor. "Adrian?" His friend's name cracked from his throat like glass breaking. Lannic's gaze dropped, his head shaking once, slow and deliberate, before he finally said the words that weighed like lead. "Adrian has disappeared. Most likely taken by Emberlash and the Ember Circle."

The world seemed to still at that. The lanterns flickered faintly, the creak of the building settling suddenly too loud in the silence that followed. Arthur sat back slowly, every muscle in his body taut, his bandages pulling with the motion. The cup in his hand trembled, though whether from the shock or the weakness of his body, even he couldn't tell. Lannic sank back into his chair, the weight of the words dragging his shoulders down, his own silence betraying the burden he too

carried. And there they sat—two men bound by blood, war, and trust—in silence so thick it pressed into their bones. The air itself seemed heavier with Adrian's absence, as if the room had swallowed them whole and left only grief in its place.

News: Gloam Sisters' Dark Deeds? An Exposé by Lena Vale

In the opulent dining room of the Bazso family manor, the evening was marked by an unusual tension. The room, usually filled with the warmth of laughter and the clinking of fine china, was now overshadowed by the weight of a troubling newspaper article. Bazso Baz, a man of wealth and influence, and his nephew Orlan Baz, were seated across from each other at the grand mahogany table. The rich aroma of a sumptuous dinner lingered in the air, but their focus was entirely on the newspaper spread between them.

Bazso Baz: (holding up the newspaper and glaring at the headline) "Orlan, have you seen this? It's scandalous. 'In the shadowy alleys of Doskvol, whispers of conspiracy and betrayal grow louder by the day. The recent violent attack on Gaddoc Station has left the city in turmoil, and a new suspect has emerged: Lira Quinval, head of the Gloam Sisters' mansion in Silkbend.'"

Orlan Baz: (nodding with concern) "Yes, I've read it. It says, 'The attack on Gaddoc Station resulted in chaos and destruction, raising the question of who would orchestrate such a brazen act. Our investigation points to the Gloam Sisters, a notorious faction known for their arcane dealings and ruthless tactics.' It's all just a smear campaign against The Crows."

Bazso Baz: (leaning back, his expression intense) "It's evident, isn't it? The Gloam Sisters are trying to shift the blame. They're manipulating the narrative to tarnish The Crows' reputation. Look here: 'Lady of the Market has publicly denied any involvement or communication with Miss Lira Quinval.' She's distancing herself while throwing The Crows under the bus."

Orlan Baz: (sipping his whiskey, clearly agitated) "It's infuriating. I've heard terrible things about The Crows from people I know. Some say they're nothing but a band of thugs and troublemakers. But I know better. Remember Jack? He saved my life. He's not the monster they're painting him to be."

Bazso Baz: (nodding) "I remember. Jack is a good man. The Crows have always been more complicated than the city's rumours suggest. They're being set up as scapegoats. This article mentions, 'The Crows were seen at Gaddoc Station, but their presence was to protect the workers and maintain order amidst the chaos.' And yet, the public is being fed a different story."

Orlan Baz: "Exactly. And despite the evidence that The Crows were defending the station, the article also reports: 'Witnesses and documented communications reveal that The Crows were actively fighting off the real attackers.' But all the city seems to focus on are the accusations."

Bazso Baz: (with a deep frown) "It's all part of a larger scheme. The Gloam Sisters and their leader are behind this. They want to discredit The Crows and protect their own interests. They're using their influence to create chaos and fear, turning public opinion against them."

Orlan Baz: (looking worried) "It's so frustrating. The Crows are being unfairly judged. Some of my friends have become so cynical, convinced that The Crows are a menace. They don't see the good they've done. They don't see Jack's sacrifice or the times The Crows have stepped in to help us."

Bazso Baz: (with a determined look) "It's a travesty. The Crows have been wrongly accused. They're not the villains here. The Gloam Sisters are manipulating the situation to their advantage, and it's affecting how people view The Crows."

Orlan Baz: "I wish there was something more we could do. The city's perception of The Crows is being skewed by those with their own agendas. It's not right. They deserve a chance to prove their side of the story."

Bazso Baz: "Perhaps that's the key. If The Crows can survive this storm and demonstrate their true intentions, they might be able to turn the tide of public opinion. They've got their work cut out for them, but they have something valuable—integrity and a sense of justice."

Orlan Baz: “And we have to believe in that. Despite everything, I think The Crows are still fighting for something greater. They’re not just outlaws; they’re fighting against a corrupt system that’s trying to break them down.”

Bazso Baz: (raising his glass) “Here’s to hope then. To The Crows and their resilience. If they can weather this storm and emerge with their honour intact, perhaps they can find a way to redeem themselves in the eyes of the city.”

Orlan Baz: (lifting his glass) “To The Crows. And to the hope that the truth will come out. That they’ll be seen for who they truly are, not just the monsters others want them to be.”

As they clinked their glasses, the atmosphere in the room was a mixture of resolve and hope. Despite the grim news and the challenges ahead, both Bazso and Orlan Baz held on to their belief that The Crows were more than the city’s rumours made them out to be. Their shared faith in The Crows’ true character became a beacon of hope in the midst of the city's uncertainty.

Chapter 8: **Shadows and Schemes**

The room smelled faintly of damp wood and overboiled kettle, the kind of cheap lodging where the walls sweated with mildew and the floor groaned at every shift of weight. Syloki had long since stopped caring about the cracked plaster or the way the ceiling sagged in one corner. She had slept in far worse places, and this one at least had four walls and a lock on the door. The chipped teacup on the little table steamed as she poured the last of the milk into it, watching the pale swirl soften the blackness before it vanished completely. It was gone now, the very last drop, but she smiled faintly at the thought that it had stretched long enough for her to enjoy this moment. Tonight, it would be tea and not much else, but that was enough. It always had to be.

She crossed the cramped room in two steps and pulled back the curtain, the fabric frayed from years of moths gnawing it thinner than cobweb. The small plant pot sat stubbornly on the sill, a wildflower she'd plucked weeks ago from the edge of a gutter and coaxed into staying alive. A few leaves drooped but its yellow bloom still stood proud, defiant against the mold and the smoke that curled into Silkshore's air. She tipped the little trickle of water from her chipped pitcher into the soil, watching it sink away, and then leaned on the frame to peer out into the streets below.

The city was always moving. Doskvol breathed in the rhythm of wheels clattering against cobblestones, of merchants shouting above the hiss of gaslamps, of steam trailing like tired banners from the chimneys lining the waterfront. From her second-floor perch she could see the painted carriages of wealthy Silkshore patrons rolling past the shabbier carts of fishmongers and hawkers, the river fog drifting between them like smoke searching for a fire. The lamps smeared the evening light across wet stone, casting people into silhouettes that passed quick and anonymous through the churn of the district. To most eyes, it was just another night in Doskvol. To Syloki, it was the restless shifting of a beast that never truly slept.

Her gaze slipped from the street to the one thing that always dragged her back to the room itself. A piece of paper, stuck to the wall with a bent nail, its edges curling from the damp. The words hit her each time as if they were fresh: *Urgent Intel: Artefact Exchange – Elias Wren involved. Cyphers & Circle. Meet for details.* No polite instructions, no safe marks, just the raw scrawl of someone in a rush. And then the single letter at the bottom, jagged as though it had been carved with anger rather than ink: *M.* She stared at it until the steam from her tea went cold, the familiar knot of dread and curiosity tangling tighter in her chest.

She sat heavily on the edge of her narrow bed, the wood frame squeaking as if protesting her weight. For a long while she let the paper loom over her, the words burned into her mind like a flare held too close. There were too many questions wound into those few lines, and every time she looked at them she felt herself balancing on the edge of a trap she couldn't yet see. Finally, with a weary breath, she reached under her pillow and pulled free the battered notebook she kept there. The cover was scuffed, pages warped from steam and rain, but it was hers, and within it lived the only order she could impose on a city determined to unravel her. She set it in her lap, thumb brushing over the frayed edge, ready to begin again.

Syloki flipped through the worn pages, the corners curling like tired petals, ink blotches bleeding into each other from nights when her hand had trembled or the rain had seeped in through the cracked ceiling. Her eyes caught on a familiar scrawl, one that always knotted her chest tighter than she liked to admit: *Olly.* His name sat there alone, framed by jagged question marks she had pressed in with such force the paper almost tore. She stared at it a long moment, the letters cutting at her like an old wound that never healed clean. Lifting the cup of tea to her lips, she let

the steam warm her face as she whispered into the room, almost too soft for her own ears. “Where did you go?” The words floated out like a sigh, weightless yet heavy all at once, carried off into the moldy air as though they might drift through the window and find him somewhere in the city.

Her finger trailed down to the note that branched away from his name, underlined twice in smudged charcoal: *Last known contact: Elias Wren.* The name seemed to glare up at her, a shadow she couldn’t escape, and she turned the page, finding herself once again surrounded by the maze she’d drawn of Wren’s dealings. Scribbled arrows pointed in every direction, fragments of overheard conversations crammed into the margins, sketches of half-remembered faces and symbols. Elias Wren, antiquities dealer, opportunist, snake. She had written the words more than once, each in a different mood, sometimes with scorn, sometimes with curiosity, sometimes with something close to fear.

On the next page, her writing softened. A name she didn’t expect to linger on, but always did: *Arthur Xavier.* A little note beneath it, almost embarrassed in how plainly she’d written it: *Friendly. Quiet type. Kinda cute.* She laughed under her breath at herself, shaking her head, tapping her finger against the words as though she could erase the confession by mocking it. The rest of her notebook sprawled outward like a map of Doskvol itself, tangled and ink-stained. Notes on the Cyphers: meticulous, careful operators threading their influence through every alleyway with quiet persistence. Notes on the Ember Circle: zealots and killers with coin enough to burn the city if it meant leaving ashes for their sermons. And between them, a war that seemed to grow louder by the day, dragging innocents into its teeth whether they knew the names of the factions or not. She chewed absently on the end of her pencil, eyes darting over her own handwriting, trying to see some pattern in the chaos that wasn’t there.

She turned again and found her sketches of the others—less thorough, but still marked by her restless need to understand. The Skarrenfolk by the docks, their faces scarred by salt and war, their hands always reaching for contraband like it was the lifeblood of the city itself. She had scrawled: *Descendants of refugees, but kings of smuggling now.* Next to it, a quick sketch of a boat, jagged and ugly, the ink smeared where her hand had caught the wet line. Then the Stoneborn, her handwriting sharper, more impatient: *Brats, some as young as eight. Orphans, survivors, dangerous in packs.* And beneath them, a single underlined word: *Resilient.* Her lips twisted into a faint smile at that—an acknowledgment, perhaps, that she understood the kind of hunger that made children carve out empires in the gutter.

Finally, her eyes rested on the notes that always made her pause a little longer, the ink smudged where her hand had pressed too heavy: *Gloam Sisters.* In the margins she had written what she’d heard, what she’d felt—*witches to some, whores to others.* The words were cruel, always spoken by men who didn’t understand or didn’t want to. But Syloki had looked closer, and her notes reflected that: *Sanctuary for women broken by abuse. Power through unity. Dangerous, yes—but not to everyone.* She leaned back, sipping her tea slowly now, her gaze hovering over the page as though the Sisters themselves might look back at her through the strokes of her pen. She respected them, feared them, and wondered if their reach extended further into her own life than she dared to believe.

The tea had cooled to a lukewarm bitterness, but she didn’t care. She sat there in the dim glow of her single lamp, the notebook open across her lap, surrounded by words and arrows that seemed to hum with their own quiet life. Her body was weary, but her mind kept circling the names, the patterns, the absences. She let her finger drift once more back to *Olly,* circled in question marks like a wound she kept reopening. The flower on the windowsill shifted faintly in the draft, and the noise of Silkshore swelled from outside—chariots rattling, voices shouting, the pulse of a city that never gave her peace. And yet, in this small room, with her notebook heavy in her lap and her tea cup cradled in her hands, Syloki felt the silence weigh heavier still.

Nearer the last pages, Syloki's fingers slowed, the paper rough beneath her fingertips, the ink thinner here where she hadn't yet filled the space with the weight of obsession. Her notes on the Crows were bare, fragmented scratches of thought that didn't amount to much. Even in a city where everyone knew something about everyone else, the Crows were an enigma. She had written the questions plainly, both answers underlined and waiting: *Good guys? Bad guys?* No one seemed to know, and those who claimed to did so with a sly smile that told her they were lying. Pinned beside her notes were a couple of newspaper clippings from recent editions of the *Blade Chronicle,* the ink still smudging faintly where her thumb brushed the margins. She read the same bold headline again—"*Chaos Erupts in Doskvol: Monsters, Fire, and Death at Gaddwick Station*"—and shook her head, scoffing. A group of thieves who didn't skulk in the shadows, but paraded their deeds for the city to watch like theater. Bold, yes, but also stupid in a way that made her mutter under her breath. "Don't criminals act in the shadows?" The question hung in the air like the steam from her tea, and she snorted softly to herself, shaking her head at the absurdity.

As though on cue, she tipped the cup too far and a warm trickle slid over the edge, staining the page in an ugly blot. She cursed under her breath and set the mug down too hard on the table, snatching up the edge of her sleeve to blot the damage. The notebook absorbed the spill in lazy blotches, curling the paper into uneven ripples, the ink smearing into little bruises of black. "Damn it," she muttered, flipping the page back and forth, trying to save it though she knew it was too late. Her eyes landed on the faint brownish halo underneath, evidence of an earlier mistake. She groaned aloud, running a hand through her hair in frustration, before letting out a small, incredulous laugh. "Apparently this is now a thing," she said to herself, voice dripping with dry humor, as if mocking her own clumsiness might undo it.

At the very back, pressed between the last pages like a secret she both wanted to forget and couldn't let go of, was a folded scrap of paper. The edges were soft from handling, creased so many times the folds had grown white and brittle. She hesitated, fingertips resting against it, then unfolded it with slow care, the sound of tearing fibers sharp in the stillness. The drawing stared back at her in all its crude innocence: a house with lopsided walls, a tree with branches like stick arms, and a crooked swing dangling from one of them. The lines were uneven, the shapes clumsy, the kind of picture made by a child just learning that drawing could capture something that mattered. Her throat tightened, and she let her eyes linger on the paper as though she could fall into it, as though the swing might sway if she stared long enough.

Her chest felt heavy, pressing in on itself with a weight she couldn't shift. She held the drawing longer than she meant to, the fragile paper trembling faintly between her fingers though her hands were steady. The lamp cast its warm light across the page, highlighting every pencil stroke, every misshapen detail, and in that glow it felt more alive than any of the words she had scrawled in her notebook. A house, a tree, a swing—it was nothing, really. And yet it was everything she had left of him. With a slow, reluctant movement, she folded it back along its familiar creases and slipped it into place, tucking it under the last page as though she could hide the ache by hiding the paper.

Her gaze drifted back to the wall, where the other piece of paper hung stubbornly, always pulling her attention no matter how many times she tried to ignore it. The same words leapt out at her, stark, impatient, unpolished: *Urgent Intel: Artefact Exchange – Elias Wren involved. Cyphers & Circle. Meet for details.* She read it again, lips moving without sound, as if repetition would change its meaning. The jagged scrawl of the single letter at the bottom, that hurried *J,* mocked her with its simplicity. So many names, so many people she needed to find, so many threads tangled tighter the more she tried to follow them. But she couldn't chase them all at once. She needed a beginning, a place to dig her fingers into the mess and pull.

Her eyes narrowed, jaw set, the last of her tea cooling in its chipped mug beside her. Elias Wren. That antiquities dealer, that hinge in the chain of power she'd been warned about, that name passed between her and Arthur Xavier in the fog of an alley. He wasn't the whole picture, she knew that much. But he was a start. And tonight, in this cheap mold-ridden room with its single lamp and its one wildflower clinging to life in a chipped pot, Syloki decided a start was enough.

Syloki opened her notes back up, the creak of the old spine of the notebook loud in the silence of her little room, the lamp flickering against the smudged ink. She flipped until she landed on the page marked with his name, her lips quirking into the faintest grin. "Mister X," she murmured to herself, the words curling out softly, habit tugging at her tongue as if speaking aloud made the thoughts real. Her finger tapped against the scrawled letters as if knocking on his door. "Where do you hide…" she leaned closer, eyes narrowing with mock suspicion, before letting the words burst out in a little laugh, "Ah-ha!" She shut the notebook with a snap, the sound louder than she meant it to be, then slid it back into its resting place beneath her pillow like it was a secret she couldn't let the world find yet. Standing, she shook out her cloak, the fabric catching faint dust from the damp room, then swung it across her shoulders with a flourish, fastening it tight against the chill she knew waited outside.

She stepped out into the corridor, the air thicker and smelling of mildew and old coal smoke that crept in from the chimneys. As always, there he was—the old blind man with the pale, unfocused eyes, leaning against the wall as though he were a fixture of the building itself. She had never seen him anywhere else, and sometimes she half-believed he rented the corridor the way others rented rooms. He tilted his head the moment her boots struck the floorboards, a smile softening his lined face. "Morning, Syloki," he said with the certainty of a man who didn't need sight to know who passed him by. She laughed under her breath, shaking her head at him as she moved closer.

"You know it's not morning, Clyde," she teased, her voice bright despite the weight she carried with her, "don't start confusing me now." He chuckled, the sound raspy but warm, and lifted a finger in her direction like a man scolding a child. "What do I care?" he said, grinning wide enough to show gaps in his teeth. "It's always dark for me anyways." His words, simple as they were, carried that edge of truth that made her chest pinch for a second. She reached out, as she often did, and let her fingers rest lightly on his shoulder, squeezing gently in farewell. His old bones shifted under her touch, but he remained smiling, as if her presence alone was enough to brighten the shadow he lived in.

She carried the warmth of that tiny exchange with her as she moved past, the floorboards groaning beneath her steps in their usual complaint. Her boots echoed in that clumsy rhythm she could never quite shake, heavy, stomping, as Clyde had once called it, and she smirked at the thought. Outside, the air rushed against her face, the cold biting, filled with the tang of salt and smoke that clung to Doskvol's veins. The streets were still alive with their usual chaos—vendors shouting half-heartedly from crooked stalls, the sound of carriage wheels clattering over cobblestones, the hiss of gaslamps barely holding the fog at bay. She pulled her cloak tighter, her eyes scanning the flow of people as if she were reading a living map, searching for the pulse of habit she could follow.

She was going to find him again, she told herself, the thought threading through her steps as she merged into the press of the crowd. Arthur Xavier wasn't the kind of man who could be hunted like quarry; he was too careful, too deliberate. But everyone had patterns, and Doskvol was a city that rewarded those who paid attention to the quiet repetitions. She turned the idea over in her head with a crooked grin. *Old dogs are creatures of habit,* she recalled hearing once, the words carried in the rhythm of someone else's voice, and it made her chuckle as she adjusted her cloak. She was betting Arthur was one of those dogs, the kind that returned to the

same shadows, the same corners, the same worn stool in the same old tavern. That was where she'd start—where the ghosts of his habits might lead her straight to him.

The Twilight Lounge breathed shadows tonight, the kind that clung to velvet drapes and curled in the amber haze above half-drained glasses. Smoke wove through the air, carrying the scent of burnt cloves and pipe ash, wrapping itself around the lazy notes of a saxophone playing in the corner. Syloki stepped lightly through the door, her eyes already sweeping across the familiar dimness, cataloguing the usual suspects in their usual places—the card table with its hunched cheats, the girl in feathers perched on a man's knee, the drunk in the corner who never seemed to leave. The Lounge was as it always was, a den of whispers and half-truths. But her eyes caught on the one figure who didn't fit the rhythm tonight.

There, sunk in the furthest booth as if trying to become one with the shadows themselves, sat Arthur Xavier. Not the Arthur she'd last seen upright and sharp-eyed in the gears and smoke of his workshop, but a man cracked by something heavier than the night. He wasn't in his sharp jacket or the carefully assembled gear she had come to expect. Instead, he looked as though he had walked straight out of the belly of a forge—overalls smudged with soot, welding goggles pushed up carelessly into his unkempt hair, his beard left to roughen his jaw without care. Two bottles already lay empty on the scarred wood before him, their glass catching what little light the corner offered, and he was working through a third with grim efficiency, each swallow a hammer striking deeper into whatever hollow he was trying to bury.

Syloki felt her jaw tighten slightly, not in judgment but in something closer to pity mixed with curiosity. Arthur Xavier was not a man who wore disarray well—it sat on him like a foreign skin, a costume too heavy for the stage. She watched the way his hand gripped the glass, fingers tight and white-knuckled, not savoring the drink but punishing it, forcing it down like a bitter medicine. His eyes, when the light caught them, were rimmed red, not from the alcohol alone but from the sleepless nights that always seemed to trail men like him. Something was broken there, something he would never admit outright, and Syloki felt the weight of it before she even spoke.

She slid into the booth with the kind of grace that belied her clumsy feet, letting her cloak spill around her like a shadow given flesh. Her gaze never left him, narrowing slightly as she took in the sight of him, disheveled and weary, drowning not in the drink but in something far heavier than liquor. The corners of her mouth tugged down as she leaned an elbow on the table, trying to keep her voice light though her eyes betrayed the concern knitting tighter in her chest. "Xavier," she said softly, her tone halfway between scold and care, "how are you holding up?"

Arthur lifted his glass again before answering, the liquid sloshing dangerously close to the rim. He didn't look at her right away, just stared into the amber depths as if the answer to everything were hidden at the bottom of the drink. When his eyes finally dragged up to hers, they carried the rawness of a man who hadn't expected to be found. His mouth twisted, something sharp behind the weariness, and he let the words slip out rough, bitter but not without the echo of exhaustion. "Syloki… why do you have to show up now? Can't you see I'm… busy?" The pause before the last word made it more curse than explanation, and the way he tossed it at her was like a man too tired to draw a blade but unwilling to put down his armor.

She leaned back slightly, one brow arched, lips pressing together as if she were weighing how much of his mask to tear away right then and there. Inside, though, she felt the pang—a quiet ache that had nothing to do with him being drunk and everything to do with the sight of a man drowning where she couldn't yet reach.

Syloki leaned forward, elbows pressing lightly against the table as she narrowed her eyes at him, her tone threading between exasperation and concern. "Busy? It looks like you're just

getting well acquainted with the bottom of that glass. You don't look well at all." Her voice carried that teasing lilt she often used to cover how serious her concern actually was, though her eyes betrayed the sharp edge beneath it. Arthur's hand trembled slightly as he tipped the glass again, the liquor sloshing before he swallowed hard and set it down with a dull thud against the wood. His sigh came out ragged, heavy, as if even the act of breathing was too much. "It's one of those days," he muttered, voice low, resigned, before his gaze flicked briefly toward her. "So, did you find anything out about the message?" He was trying to steer away, trying to anchor himself back into the work, but Syloki wasn't going to let him. Not when he looked like this.

She studied him for a long beat, her usually playful expression softening into something steady, more serious, the way her gaze could settle like a hand on someone's shoulder. "What happened to you, Arthur?" The question wasn't sharp, wasn't prying, but it cut through the smokescreen all the same, her tone carrying both insistence and gentleness. He shook his head, slow and tired, and when he spoke his words dragged with weight. "To me nothing. I simply got distracted by… people. While in mission. And my friend got taken." The way he paused over the word "people" made her chest tighten, though she didn't press, letting his silence fill the air instead. Sometimes it wasn't the words but the quiet between them that told the truth. She simply waited, her eyes on him, refusing to let him drown without someone watching.

Finally, Arthur reached into his pocket with a deliberate slowness, as though even pulling the object out cost him something. He placed a small, worn compass on the table, pushing it toward her with two fingers. The brass casing was dulled, the needle trembling faintly though no breeze disturbed it. Syloki leaned closer, her brow furrowing as she tilted her head, the faintest quirk of a smile tugging at her lips. "This is broken, I'm pretty sure north is that way," she said, pointing a finger off toward the far wall with a deliberate deadpan. She wanted him to smile, to crack even a little. Arthur's lips twitched but never broke into humor, his voice steady instead as he explained, "This is different. It's fine tuned to a certain someone. Adrian Blackwood. My partner and friend in the Cyphers. One of them."

Syloki's teasing expression fell, her shoulders drawing back as her eyes sharpened, flicking between him and the strange needle that refused to point true. She asked softly, "Where is he now?" Her words carried the weight of a prayer, even though she wasn't the praying kind. Arthur only shrugged, the motion small, defeated, his gaze fixed somewhere far beyond the dim lights of the Lounge. "I followed the arrow. It takes me to the docks and keeps pointing out to the waters. Either dead and disposed, or taken somewhere beyond the waters. I let him down. We were supposed to be watching each other. Me, him, and Silas. But they distracted me, you know." The way he said it, flat and bitter, like the words themselves were knives pressed to his own ribs, made her want to reach across the table and shake him, or maybe just place her hand over his until he stopped clawing at his own guilt.

Arthur's hand drifted back toward the bottle as if pulled by gravity itself, his fingers curling halfway around the neck before Syloki's instincts took over. With a sudden snap of motion, she lunged across and snatched the glass from his hand, ignoring the sharpness in his glare. Without giving herself time to think, she tipped it back and swallowed the amber fire that scorched down her throat. The burn was immediate and vicious, tears springing to her eyes as she coughed, hand clapping against her chest. She sputtered, voice ragged between the coughs, "You can have more once we finish talking, or once I collapse. Geez louise, what the hell is in this thing??" She half-wheezed, half-laughed, her body curled slightly from the heat in her chest.

Her attempt at humor hung awkwardly in the air, Arthur not quite breaking but at least looking at her instead of the bottle. His eyes, storm-dark and red-rimmed, lingered on her as though caught between irritation and a reluctant, unspoken gratitude. Syloki smirked faintly through her

watery eyes, shrugging her shoulders as if to say, *See? Still here. Still keeping you from going under.* And for the first time that night, Arthur's gaze didn't drift away, didn't sink back into the glass—he stayed with her, his silence softer now, as though she had pulled him, if only for a moment, out of the undertow.

Arthur's gaze lingered on her, the way someone might force themselves to look into a flame rather than the dark—it was deliberate, strained, as though keeping himself tethered to her presence required muscle. His fingers tapped once against the side of the glass he'd been denied, then stilled, and when he finally spoke, his voice carried that flat weight again, steady but heavy. "Have you figured out who your mysterious admirer is?" The question hung in the thick, smoky air of the Lounge, not just curiosity but the kind of suspicion that came from a man who had learned too many secrets never ended clean. Syloki leaned back slightly, resting her arm along the side of the booth, lips quirking in the faintest smirk as she answered with a tone that was half play, half seriousness. "You mean Mister M? Yes, I have an idea. Ever heard of Merrow Valesque?" Her voice dropped just enough on his name, as if saying it too loudly might summon something out of the shadows.

Arthur gave a short, sharp scoff, more breath than laugh, and leaned back against the cracked leather of the booth. "Who hasn't," he muttered, eyes narrowing in that guarded way of his. "The terror of Doskvol. Somewhere out there, they say." His mouth twisted slightly, bitter, before he added, "The big question is, why is he sending you that note?" He didn't look at her when he said it, his eyes fixed instead on some invisible point in the far corner of the room, but the weight of his words landed squarely between them. Syloki tilted her head, her lips pressing together as she considered, trying to piece what he wasn't saying. Did Arthur already know something he wasn't ready to share? Or was this his way of testing how much she understood? Her fingers drummed lightly against the table, her expression thoughtful, caught between suspicion and curiosity.

"Well," she said slowly, her voice softer now, the usual playful lilt stripped away. "It led me to the Cyphers. And the Circle. And you…" Her gaze locked on him as she spoke, steady, measuring the flicker of his expression as much as his words. Arthur's eyes shifted finally to meet hers, the fatigue behind them mingling with calculation, and for a moment it looked as though he was balancing equations in his head, trying to solve the riddle while he spoke it aloud. His lips pressed into a line, then parted with a rough exhale. "Merrow would not try reconcile the Cypher and Ember Circle war," he said, tone carrying the certainty of someone who had lived in the trenches of that conflict far too long. "Even he knows better than to try." His hand twitched faintly toward the compass on the table before moving away again, restless.

He reached at last for the bottle, the glass already waiting like an accomplice at his side. The neck clinked softly against the rim as he poured, the amber liquid catching the faint golden light of the Lounge as it swirled into the cup. Syloki didn't move at first, just watched him with her brows arched high, her head cocked ever so slightly like a cat ready to spring. The corner of her mouth curved into the faintest challenge, silent but clear—*go on, see if I don't take it again.* Her fingers flexed against the tabletop as though testing the distance, already rehearsing the snatch before he could raise it.

Arthur's hand lingered on the glass, his knuckles pale where they pressed into the side, and though he didn't yet bring it to his lips, the tension coiled there was thick enough to taste. Syloki's eyes narrowed, her body angled forward just slightly, ready to intercept even though the last swig had nearly burned her throat raw. She didn't really like it—hell, she hated it—but anything to keep him from sinking further, from drowning himself in amber until he forgot his own name. If she had to choke down another mouthful, if she had to cough her lungs out again to break his stare from the bottle, she would. For now, she let the silence hang, her eyebrow raised like a dare, her presence in that booth a line drawn between him and the abyss.

As if to distract Arthur from the pull of the glass, Syloki leaned forward with a glint in her eyes and asked, “Why would someone like Merrow be involved with Elias?” Her tone was light but edged with curiosity, the kind of question that sounded casual but carried barbs meant to dig. Arthur didn’t even blink, his reply plain and flat, as though the thought had been in his head for weeks. “Elias is exactly the kind of rat that Merrow likes to work with. I wouldn’t be the least surprised if Elias tinkers on stuff for Merrow every now and then. Especially since he has escaped.” His voice dragged on that last word, not rushed, not dramatic, but heavy with the kind of certainty that made her stomach twist. She hated how steady he sounded, as if betrayal and shadowy alliances were just facts of weather, nothing to raise your head against.

Syloki lifted her cup, more for something to do with her hands than for the taste of what remained in it, her lips pursing as she murmured, “Yeah, I heard about that. I thought Ironscar was supposed to be super secure and on the continent, across the bay.” Her words carried that half-scoff, half-doubt she couldn’t help but throw into most conversations when the subject turned grim. She wanted him to argue, to disprove her, but Arthur just kept staring at some point beyond her, past the dark velvet curtains of the booth as though the wall itself might give up the answers if he looked hard enough. “He was broken out,” he said at last, voice lower, almost as if the weight of it dragged him down into the seat. “From the outside. I’ve heard it once before that the Crows have helped him before they even became the Crows.”

Syloki stayed silent at that, her tongue pressing against the back of her teeth as she turned it over in her mind. The Crows—those daring, reckless thieves making headlines like they owned the ink—now tangled with Merrow? That was a thought that made the edges of her mouth twitch, not into a smile but into something sharper, the kind of expression you made when the puzzle pieces looked like they belonged but spelled out something you didn’t want to read. She traced the rim of her cup with her finger and muttered more to herself than to Arthur, “Well, from everything I’ve read about the Crows and Merrow and his royal gang back in the day, they are a nice fit.” Her tone was dry, sardonic, but underneath it there was that sting of unease, like she was daring him to argue and hating that he probably wouldn’t.

Arthur answered with nothing more than a nod, his head tilting just slightly as if he was weighing the truth of her words and finding no reason to fight them. His eyes dipped back to the table, to the half-poured drink waiting in the glass between them, and Syloki saw his hand twitch, fingers stretching just a fraction before curling back. He made a slight move to grab the glass, not quick, not desperate, but deliberate, a man testing the waters of his own restraint. Syloki’s reaction was instinct, her own hand moving in mirrored motion, ready to intercept with that same reckless stubbornness she had already shown.

Arthur stopped halfway, his hand hovering just above the rim without closing on it, and Syloki froze mid-reach. Neither touched it, neither claimed the amber temptation that sat there glowing between them in the dim light. Instead they both lingered in that frozen moment, the drink sitting like a third presence at their table, daring them to acknowledge who wanted it more. She narrowed her eyes, her lips twitching into the faintest smile, and thought to herself with both amusement and annoyance, *he’s playing with me now.* Arthur didn’t smirk, didn’t wink, didn’t even glance at her, but the corner of his mouth tightened just enough that she knew he was aware. What a tease, she thought, and despite herself, the corner of her own lips lifted in reply.

Syloki leaned forward, her eyes steady, her voice sharpened with resolve as she said, “That’s why I need to speak with the Crows directly. They’re the key to understanding this mess.” The words landed heavy between them, and for just a heartbeat Arthur’s composure cracked. It was quick, a flicker, the barest tightening at the corner of his mouth and a faint shift in his shoulders, but Syloki caught it. She always caught those little fractures in people, the things they tried to bury. He pretended it hadn’t even crossed his mind, straightening in his seat as though the thought belonged to someone else entirely, but she could see through it. His jaw worked once

before he finally gave her a look that was both sharp and weary, the kind of gaze that said he wished she hadn't noticed.

"And you think the Crows will be able to help you unravel this?" Arthur's words came out measured, calm in tone but carrying that undercurrent of skepticism he never quite managed to disguise. He leaned back slightly, the shadows of the booth catching against his cheekbones, his hand curling loosely around the edge of the table. His voice didn't rise, didn't push back, but the weight of the question pressed into the space between them like a warning. Syloki didn't flinch. She never did when someone tried to test her resolve.

"Yes," she replied without hesitation, her chin lifting as she leaned in. "Their connections and resources might give us the edge we need. Will you help me make that contact?" Her voice softened at the end, not pleading, but carrying enough warmth to make the request sound less like a demand and more like trust. She watched him carefully, her eyes not leaving his, and what she saw there was an internal war he wasn't ready for her to name. His silence stretched too long, the flickering candlelight between them throwing shadows across his furrowed brow as though even the flame was impatient for his answer.

Arthur hesitated, and Syloki could see the pull of it in every line of his body. His hand twitched once toward the compass on the table, then drifted back as though even that small anchor might betray him. His eyes narrowed, lips pressed into a line, and his breathing came slow, controlled, like a man trying not to show how close he was to breaking open. At last, after what felt like a small eternity, he nodded. It wasn't eager, it wasn't sure, but it was there. Reluctant, almost bitter, but it was a yes. "Alright," he said at last, voice low, rough around the edges. "I'll get you in touch with the Crows. But be aware you might waste your time. I hear that the Crows are laying low. I've been with them recently. They're still licking their wounds from a recent conflict with other factions. During a mission involving Lannic's prototype, the Ember Circle attacked their base. They're not taking it lightly."

Syloki's lips curved, not into a smile but into something sly, sharp with the satisfaction of having read him right. "I read about that in the *Blade Chronicle*," she said, her tone dipping into that knowing lilt she used when she wanted to press someone without looking like she was. Her eyes stayed fixed on him, steady and unflinching. "You were there, weren't you? Helping the Crows?" The way she said it was deliberate, not a question but an unveiling, like she had known all along. In truth, the puzzle pieces were just now sliding into place in her mind, clicking into their sharp little grooves, but she wasn't about to let him see how uncertain she'd been before. She wanted him to feel seen, wanted him to feel caught.

The realization burned through her in silence, and she felt the weight of it settle into her chest. The Cyphers had been part of that attack, one way or another—it was the only way all the trails lined up. But which side Arthur had been standing on, she could only guess. Still, it all made sense now: his partner Adrian was lost in that mission, and if the Circle had taken him, then the man was either dead or worse, sitting in some dark cell being broken piece by piece. Her gaze softened slightly as it landed back on Arthur, on the empty bottle between them, on the tightness in his face that hadn't left since she walked in. Now it was clear why he was in this state tonight. It wasn't the drink that had hollowed him out—it was guilt. That terrible poison she knew too well, the one that left its taste clinging to the back of your throat long after you tried to swallow it down. Syloki didn't say it aloud, but for the first time that night, she felt the bitter weight of his grief settle in beside her own.

As if tugging on a thread that had been dangling loose between them all along, Arthur finally broke the silence with a low, measured voice. "Merrow doesn't want to make the Cyphers friends again. He's using Elias to fuel intrigue and feed both sides powerful weapons. He's stoking conflict, not smoothing it. But why?" His brow furrowed as he spoke, his hand rubbing at

the edge of his beard in that absent way he always did when the weight of a puzzle pressed too heavily against his skull. His eyes had gone distant again, the dim lamplight of the booth catching on their sharp edges, his whole frame sinking into the thought as though the world outside of it no longer existed. Syloki tilted her head, her lips quirking with a spark of reckless inspiration, and said, “Why don’t we ask someone who knows better?”

Arthur’s gaze snapped to her at once, puzzled, his silence deep enough to pull at her like a current. She let it linger for a heartbeat, then leaned forward with a conspiratorial grin, her voice dropping into the kind of sly whisper that still carried far too much cheer. “Let’s summon a recent victim of the Ember Circle. Or Merrow. A powerful Whisper can summon recently deceased spirits and ask them questions. I’ve seen it happen! Do you know one around?” The way she said it was bright, almost playful, like a child showing off a secret treasure. But inside, her stomach twisted at once, regret blooming sharp and heavy. She knew exactly where Arthur’s calculating mind would go with that suggestion. If Adrian was truly dead, if his body had already been discarded somewhere into the dark, Arthur would want to call on him. And that thought—seeing the hope flare in his eyes only to burn him further—was enough to make her wish she could swallow the words back down. She didn’t even need to hear the whirring cogs in his head; she could feel them, the way the air between them seemed to tighten as his thoughts turned there.

Arthur didn’t speak right away. Instead, he sat with the idea, eyes fixed on the wood of the table as though he could read the answers carved in its grain. His jaw tightened, loosened, and for a moment Syloki thought he might dismiss it with one of his cutting remarks, but then he gave a slow, deliberate nod. “As a matter of fact,” he said, voice lower now, weighed down by something heavier than curiosity, “there is a medium. Charges money for it. I’d like to say I don’t believe in these things, but my bullets literally have electroplasm energy in some of them.” He gave her a look that was neither wry nor dismissive—more the kind of look a man gives when he’s already lost too much and knows he’ll gamble with anything left. The sound of it tightened something inside her chest, but she pressed it down.

“Then it is decided,” Syloki said quickly, her smile snapping back into place, her head bobbing with a show of enthusiasm she didn’t quite feel. She needed to keep him moving forward, not sinking deeper into whatever guilt was already eating him alive. And if that meant playing the reckless optimist, she’d do it until it cost her. Arthur gave a small grunt of acknowledgment, his hand already inching toward his glass again. She caught the motion from the corner of her eye and reacted on instinct, her body moving faster than her thoughts. With a quick flick of her wrist, she snatched the drink from under his fingertips and threw it back herself.

The burn hit her throat like fire on raw wounds, and immediately her eyes watered, her lungs protesting as she wheezed and coughed through the bitter poison of whatever he’d been pouring into himself all night. She hacked against the back of her hand, trying to recover some shred of dignity, but it was a losing battle. Arthur’s lips curved upward as he watched, and the soft, sly glint of amusement in his tired eyes was unmistakable. He was smiling—actually smiling—at her misery. Syloki slammed the glass down and glared through her watery eyes, her voice rasping as she croaked, “You bastard, you set me up.” The realization hit with the sting of betrayal, but it was quickly softened by the absurdity of it all, by the way he didn’t even have to say anything, just sat there with that quiet, infuriating smirk. He hadn’t moved, hadn’t taunted her, but his silence said everything.

Arthur pushed back his chair, slow and steady, the smirk fading back into his usual guarded expression as he rose to his feet. He grabbed his coat from the back of the booth with practiced ease, the heavy fabric whispering against the table as he slung it over his shoulders. He didn’t bother with another word, not even a glance at the bottle left behind, as though his little game had already served its purpose. Syloki sat there, coughing the last of the fire from her lungs,

watching him stand taller again, and for all the bitterness of the liquor on her tongue, she couldn't help but think she'd won something small, too—pulled him, however briefly, out of the pit he'd been drowning in.

As they stepped away from the smoke and low jazz of the Twilight Lounge, the city pressed close around them, Crow's Foot sprawling with its usual labyrinth of narrow alleys and crooked stone paths. Arthur walked ahead with that purposeful weight to his stride, his boots thudding against the cobblestones, while Syloki kept close, her cloak brushing the damp walls whenever the alleys pinched tighter. The deeper they went, the darker the streets became, gaslamps either broken or long since stolen, replaced only by faint glimmers of gutter fires and the whispers of restless shadows. Arthur led her to an unremarkable house, its wooden boards sagging and faded with age. From the street it looked like nothing more than a modest home belonging to some factory worker's family, but tucked into the back garden was a small shed-like structure, half-swallowed by vines and shadow, its door marked only by faint scratches that might have been wards or careless vandalism.

Arthur knocked once, firm and steady. The door creaked open without anyone visibly pulling it, revealing a stairway descending sharply into darkness. A cool draft rushed upward, carrying with it the smell of old earth, candle wax, and faint traces of burnt sage. Syloki hesitated for only a heartbeat before following Arthur down, her boots echoing faintly in the cramped stairwell. The further they descended, the colder the air became, the stone walls narrowing on either side, glowing faintly where small wards had been painted in phosphorescent ink. The sigils cast thin, flickering shadows across their faces, as though unseen hands followed them step by step. By the time they reached the bottom, Syloki's breath was fogging lightly in the air.

The sanctuary itself unfolded before them like a hidden chamber carved into the earth. It wasn't large, but it was dense, brimming with the kind of arcane paraphernalia that made the space feel alive with power. Shelves leaned under the weight of ancient tomes bound in cracked leather, their spines marked with glyphs that seemed to twitch when glanced at too long. Glass jars sat in neat rows, each containing faint motes of ghostlight, or worse—flickering shadows that curled and pressed against the glass as though they yearned to escape. Small trinkets, charms, and talismans littered the tables, while in the far corner an incense burner trickled thin blue smoke into the air, its scent sweet but sharp, making Syloki's nose itch. In the centre of the room, a ritual circle had been painted onto the stone floor, its lines meticulously drawn, fresh chalk dust still clinging to the edges.

And standing in the heart of it all was Lysandra Grey. Her presence was impossible to miss—commanding without being loud, enigmatic without needing theatrics. She looked younger than Syloki had expected, her curls framing her face in a wild halo that caught the dim light, her smile easy but hiding secrets in its curve. Her build was strong, grounded, the sort of presence that felt immovable, like someone who had already seen the worst the world had to offer and chosen to bend it to her will. A thin silver chain caught the light at her throat, and her eyes—grey, deep and watchful—settled on them with a clarity that made Syloki feel suddenly transparent, as though the Whisper could already read every lie, secret, and shadow she carried.

Lysandra's lips curved into something that was neither friendly nor cold, but rather a sharp line of recognition. Her voice rolled out smooth, low, and deliberate, each word layered with the faint vibration of someone who had spoken too often in candlelit rooms with spirits hovering just out of sight. "Arthur," she said, the name leaving her tongue like a statement rather than a greeting. "It's been some time. And you've brought a guest." Her gaze flicked to Syloki, measuring her, weighing her, and Syloki felt her spine straighten against the intensity of it, refusing to shrink.

Arthur, his face unreadable though his hand tightened slightly at the edge of his coat, gave a curt nod. “Lysandra, this is Syloki. We’re in need of your expertise. The stakes are high.” His tone was steady, but there was a weight to it that only someone who had walked into the room with guilt on their shoulders could carry. Syloki glanced once at him, then back at Lysandra, her pulse quickening with the strange mixture of fear and thrill that always came before secrets were about to be torn into the open.

Syloki said with awe in her voice, looking around at the shelves of spirit jars and strange tomes, “Arthur, I had no idea. A mechanical brain like you, lover of brass and screws. How do you know this place?” Arthur sat at a table, already set to receive clients, opposite Lysandra and beside Syloki. He leaned back slightly, his expression as flat as ever, and replied, “Through a mutual friend.” Lysandra’s gaze sharpened as though she already knew the answer before asking, her voice smooth but tinged with genuine curiosity. “How’s Twilight Bloom lately? I hope she is doing well.” Arthur gave the faintest nod, answering in his dry but honest way, not a man for small talk. “She is better. Holding up.” With that, the thread was left hanging, no elaboration given, and Arthur’s silence pressed like a wall that discouraged further digging.

Syloki’s eyes were wide as she leaned back in her chair, the wood creaking under her shifting weight as she kept scanning every corner of the sanctuary. The jars of ghostlight seemed to fascinate her, and she tilted her head, curls spilling forward as she asked, “Are those… real spirits in there? They look like they’re moving. Do they talk to you, or do they just sort of… wiggle around angrily?” Lysandra’s lips curved faintly, the kind of restrained smile of someone used to being asked such questions, and she answered with calm certainty, her voice low but clear. “Both. They can speak, if coaxed properly. But they rarely say what you want them to. Spirits don’t see the world as we do, and their truths are fragmented.” Syloki’s mouth formed a small “oh,” and she leaned forward, chin propped in her hand like a student caught up in a story, pressing on with a new question before the silence could settle.

“And what about that?” she pointed toward a vial filled with faint smoke that pulsed like a heartbeat, its glow ebbing and returning. “That looks like… soul residue, right? Or am I making things up again?” Her voice carried a playful note, as if daring Lysandra to laugh at her. But Lysandra only tilted her head, her grey eyes catching the dim light as she replied smoothly, “You’re not wrong. That one came from a ritual botched in Six Towers. The remnants cling to the glass, but it will fade in time. Dangerous if broken, though. Soul fragments don’t like being released all at once.” Syloki shivered theatrically and sat back, hands folding on her lap, though her grin betrayed her excitement. “So basically, don’t drop the jar, got it.”

The conversation spiraled with Syloki asking faster than she realized, her curiosity bursting through every line. “How do you even learn this? Did the Gloam Sisters actually teach you? I heard they keep all their secrets locked tight, like a coven with knives hidden under their dresses. Or is that just one of those stories drunk men tell to make themselves feel better?” Lysandra did not flinch at the mention of her past. She answered evenly, though her voice held an edge like tempered steel. “The Sisters teach, yes. But what they teach comes with chains. I wanted freedom. So I learned what I could and then I made the choice to leave. Knowledge isn’t theirs to hoard. It belongs to those willing to seek it.” Syloki, practically glowing with admiration, nodded eagerly. “See, I like that. Knowledge should be free. Even if it comes with the occasional angry ghost chasing you through an alley.” She gave a lopsided grin, trying to lighten the mood again.

Arthur, seated silent and steady between them, let them talk, his hand resting near the compass on the table, his gaze heavy on the chalk-drawn ritual circle. He was listening, always listening, but gave no sign of wanting to join in the back-and-forth. Syloki’s words filled the space easily, and Lysandra seemed more willing to engage her than him. “What about those wards on the stairway?” Syloki pressed on, gesturing toward the stairs they had descended. “They hummed

in my bones. I swear I could feel them in my teeth. Do they just keep spirits out, or could they also keep something in?" Lysandra's eyes flicked to Arthur briefly, then back to Syloki. "They do both. The wards aren't barriers so much as warnings. Cross them, and you've already been seen." The implication sent a ripple down Syloki's spine, but she masked it with another eager smile. "Well, I'm glad they let us pass. Must mean we're not completely rotten."

The Whisper moved with casual grace, shifting one of the jars aside with the back of her hand as though to punctuate her next words. "Curiosity is a dangerous thing, Syloki. But it can be useful if sharpened properly. Just be sure it doesn't cut you first." Syloki laughed lightly, though she couldn't help the warmth in her cheeks, and leaned in again. "Oh, I've been cut plenty already. I'm still here though, so maybe that counts for something." Her tone was light but not empty, and for a moment, Lysandra's expression softened, the sharpness in her eyes dulling as though she recognized something familiar in her guest.

Finally, Syloki remembered why they had come, and she let her voice grow steadier, more deliberate, though her hands still fidgeted faintly against the table. She sat forward and said, "We need information about Merrow Valesque and his dealings with Elias Wren, the Ember Circle, and the Cyphers. The city's factions are at war, and we need to understand the connections." The name hung in the air like smoke refusing to dissipate. Lysandra regarded them both, but her gaze lingered on Syloki, deep and probing, as if weighing her true intent against the words. At last, she said with deliberate calm, "This is a very wide topic. Can you be more specific?"

As they watched Lysandra slowly start her ritual, Syloki kept talking, her words spilling out as though the silence of the sanctuary demanded to be filled. "I guess we are looking for anyone, any recent deceased soul. I'm looking for clues on Merrow, a guy called Elias, and anyone on the Ember Circle I guess. But I'm stuck as to where to look next. Just some light guidance will do for now, if anything." She chuckled nervously, fingers drumming lightly on the edge of the table as if to mask the unease creeping into her chest. Her voice carried a bright edge, but her eyes kept darting back toward Lysandra, who was already deep into the rhythm of her craft. The Whisper didn't answer her—didn't even seem to hear. Her chanting was a low murmur, heavy and guttural, and her hands moved in deliberate arcs, fingertips cutting glowing lines into the air like ink spilled across invisible parchment. The smell of singed copper and salt began to curl through the room, tickling the nose and burning faintly at the back of the throat.

Syloki stopped rambling then, her own words suddenly sounding too loud, too misplaced. She folded her hands together and pressed them against her lips, wide-eyed, watching as the ritual built momentum. The air itself seemed to thicken, heavy and restless, like the silence before a storm. Her curls slipped forward as she leaned in, trying not to blink as faint sparks flickered across the surface of the ritual circle. She glanced once at Arthur beside her—stone-faced as ever, his jaw clenched and his eyes locked on the unfolding work. There was something in his posture, the way he leaned forward, that betrayed a hunger beneath his stillness. She could tell he was thinking of Adrian even if he hadn't said the name aloud.

Lysandra's chanting grew louder, the words not of any language Syloki knew, but they reverberated in her chest like a drumbeat she could feel in her bones. The candles sputtered and flared high, shadows stretching across the walls as if alive, reaching toward the circle. Her hands carved one last intricate pattern into the air, and the faint blue light of spirit wards etched across the shelves flared in answer. The entire sanctuary seemed to tremble, glass rattling on shelves, pages rustling as though caught by an invisible breeze. Syloki felt the hair rise along her arms, gooseflesh prickling her skin, her heart stuttering in her chest. She gripped the edge of the table tighter, forcing herself not to shrink back.

“Concentrate on a name, if you have someone to summon,” Lysandra’s voice carried, strained but steady, eyes still closed as sweat began to glisten along her brow. “On a topic if you are looking for answers. Let the spirits hear it and respond as they wish. Clear your minds.” Syloki swallowed, her throat suddenly dry, and forced herself to breathe evenly. She tried to think of Merrow, of Elias, of the Ember Circle, each name tumbling over the other in her mind like dice cast in the dark. Her gaze flicked again to Arthur, whose eyes looked almost fevered in the dim blue glow. If he said Adrian’s name now, she feared the ritual would twist into something far heavier than she had bargained for. She bit the inside of her cheek, choosing to stay silent, waiting.

As Lysandra’s chant reached its crescendo, the air cracked like a whip, and a faint figure began to coalesce within the circle. It started as nothing more than smoke, whirling and pulling itself together, but slowly the features took shape. A man stood before them, pale and wavering like a candle’s flame, yet undeniable. His high-collared coat glistened with phantom raindrops, the fabric eternally damp as though caught in a storm no one else could see. Steam rose faintly from the edges, curling upward and vanishing into the air above. A satchel hung heavy at his side, bulging with old documents and scraps of occult nonsense, spectral pages shifting faintly as though the bag breathed with him.

The boots on his feet were absurdly fine, gleaming despite the spectral haze, shoes fit for a noble’s ballroom rather than the muddy alleys of Doskvol. It was wrong, and yet it suited him, the contradiction carved into his very presence. Most striking of all were his eyes—deep wells of melancholy shadowed by mischief, that uncanny mixture that sent Syloki’s stomach lurching. They gleamed with recognition, as if he knew her, knew Arthur, knew them both too well already. His lips parted in the faintest curl of amusement, and though his voice had not yet come, Syloki felt the weight of his gaze settle like a shiver across her spine. It was as though a figure from a forgotten play had walked offstage and into their fragile circle, ready to speak lines none of them could predict.

Lysandra started talking, her voice deep and steady as the shimmering air quivered around them, addressing the spirit that had taken shape. “Márcio Keel, I welcome thee. In this protection circle, you are made visible and tangible. Give us your wisdom, we hunger for it.” Her hands remained raised, the faint glow of wards still flickering across her fingertips, but her eyes stayed open now, fixed on the figure before them. The name echoed in Syloki’s head, foreign and strange, yet spoken with such authority it rooted itself there, demanding to be remembered. She swallowed hard, her breath catching as she stared at the man in the high collar and polished boots, the faint steam rising from his coat giving him a presence more real than a ghost ought to have.

Syloki’s feelings were a whirlwind, crashing against each other in waves that left her chest tight. Seeing the arcane at work always brought a rush—half awe, half dread—as though she were a child again, peeking through a door she wasn’t supposed to open. Her pulse thudded against her throat, every nerve in her body alight, and yet this time something else tangled itself into the storm of emotion. Relief. Fierce, sharp relief that the face before her was not Adrian. She didn’t even know what Adrian Blackwood looked like, but Arthur’s silence and the haunted light in his eyes had convinced her he was reaching out for his lost friend. If Adrian had not answered, if someone else had come instead, that had to mean he was still alive somewhere. The realization sank into her bones like a sudden breath of clean air after being underwater too long.

Her relief, however, tangled quickly into confusion. Márcio Keel. Who was this man, dressed like a character stolen from some lost stage play, satchel heavy with forgotten lore, eyes piercing as if they already knew her secrets? Why him, and why now? She hugged her arms tight across her chest, feeling suddenly exposed under that ghostly stare. Her instinct was to talk, to ask questions and fill the silence, but for once the words stuck in her throat. Her curiosity burned

hot, clawing at her chest, but it clashed with unease—what if she didn't want the answers he carried?

Her eyes flicked to Arthur, searching his face for some kind of clue, but he gave her none. His expression was tight, controlled, though the slight tic in his jaw betrayed his disappointment. He wanted Adrian. He had been silently begging for Adrian, and this man, this Márcio, was not him. Syloki felt a pang of sympathy—she knew the sting of absence too well—but she also knew that if Adrian had appeared, Arthur might have broken apart entirely. This way, at least, they could still stand together. She bit her lip, not daring to say it out loud, afraid the thought itself might shatter the fragile balance in the air.

Still, the unease gnawed at her. The way Márcio looked at them—steady, unblinking, a faint curl of amusement playing at the corners of his mouth—wasn't that of a stranger meeting the living for the first time. It was as if he recognized them, had been expecting them even. Syloki's fingers toyed nervously with the hem of her cloak, twisting the fabric between her hands, her mind racing with questions she didn't dare speak. Who was this man in life? Why did he die? And why did his spirit look upon them with eyes that carried both grief and mischief, like he already knew what threads tied them together?

As the silence stretched, the shimmering air between the living and the dead grew thick, heavy with anticipation. Syloki's heart thudded painfully against her ribs, each beat demanding an answer she wasn't sure she wanted. She leaned forward slightly, breath shallow, unable to shake the question burning in her skull: what was Márcio Keel doing there that night, and why did it feel like he had been waiting for them all along?

Lysandra straightened her back, her hands weaving tighter, sharper sigils in the air as her voice deepened, carrying the command of someone who had spoken to more spirits than most dared dream of. "Márcio Keel, reveal to us what doom awaits. What must we do to avert it?" The circle pulsed faintly in the dim light, wards trembling like strings drawn too tight, and the apparition flickered, his outline shivering as if he were caught between two worlds at once. When his reply came, it did not spill from his mouth, but rather from everywhere at once—the walls, the floor, the very air vibrating with his hollow tone. "A storm is on the horizon. A fire that will engulf all. Merrow Valesque... herald of chaos, bearer of doom. He has set the wheels in motion... the flames of destruction already threaten Doskvol's edges." The voice rattled through their bones, low and dreadful, as though the city itself had spoken.

Syloki, unable to sit still, leaned forward on the table, her hands splayed against its rough wood, the glimmer of spirit wards reflecting in her wide eyes. Her voice, steady but strained, pushed through the thrum in the air. "What actions should we take? How can we stop this impending disaster?" The words tumbled out sharp, almost desperate, though she tried to mask it with resolve. The specter's form rippled as if caught in a wind only it could feel, his coat flaring outward in unnatural currents. His voice came fractured now, torn between echoes. "Magic alone will falter... in the face of the coming storm. Only those... with wills strong enough to alter fate... can change the outcome. Lives will be lost... if action is not taken." At that moment, a harsh chorus of caws broke from outside the sanctuary. The crows roared to life in the darkness, their wings clattering against rooftops, startled into flight by something unseen. The noise pressed against the walls, filling the room with a frantic omen.

Arthur grimaced, the compass still in his hand trembling faintly, as though even it sensed the truth of the ghost's words. His voice cut through the echo, rough and laced with frustration. "But how? How do we change what's already set in motion?" The spirit's head turned, snapping its attention wholly onto Arthur, its eyes locking to his as if they had always belonged there. "Seek the hidden truths... the buried secrets... within the city's heart. Allies and enemies... are mere masks... obscuring the true threat. Valesque's madness... is just the beginning. Greater

darkness... waits to be unleashed." Arthur's lips parted, the color draining from his face, but no words came. His hand tightened around the compass as though it were an anchor to keep him from being pulled under by the weight of the phantom's stare.

Lysandra's chant softened, the ritual fraying as the toll of holding the spirit pressed on her. Beads of sweat rolled down her temples, her shoulders trembling under the invisible strain. "Márcio, what more can you tell us? How do we uncover these hidden truths?" Her voice cracked slightly, betraying effort even as she fought to hold the circle together. The ghost's form wavered, fading at the edges, his outline bleeding into the air like ink dissolving into water. His reply was slower now, fragmented, a whisper stretched to breaking. "Look to the past... to old wounds that never healed. The answers lie... where light does not reach. But beware... the cost of knowledge is steep. Only those... willing to sacrifice... will find the path to salvation." His last words rattled like broken glass, heavy with finality.

Then it began. The specter's shape twisted, the faint glow of his outline warping as if a hand unseen had seized him by the throat. His head jerked back, his coat falling away in fragments of light as a wet, rattling cough tore from him. But it wasn't sound—it was sensation, pressing against their eardrums, vibrating the walls with the grotesque impression of lungs drowning. Márcio's hands clawed at his own neck, the veins in his eyes bursting in sharp crimson that trailed down his face like ink bleeding through parchment. The air soured in an instant, the smell turning sickly, metallic, like rust ground into copper and left to rot. Syloki gagged, her hand clamping against her mouth, eyes wide with horror as she watched the ghost's body convulse and seize. His form arched violently, spine contorting in a way no man alive could survive, the tendons of his spectral body pulled taut as though he were being wrung dry.

And then he melted. His body dissolved into streams of liquid that weren't liquid, dripping down onto the table with no sound, no splash, the shape of him collapsing into a slick shadow that pooled at their feet. His eyes rolled white in one final spasm, mouth stretched wide in a scream no sound carried, before the mass of him slithered across the floor and seeped into the circle's edges. It all vanished as the wards collapsed, snuffed out like candle flames in a storm. The table was clean. The ground was bare. The stink, the terror, the impossible sight—all gone, leaving only silence and the shallow, uneven breaths of those still alive.

The three of them sat there, silent as gravestones, the oppressive stillness settling heavy on their shoulders. The wards had guttered out, leaving the sanctuary dim, the shadows stretched long across the shelves of tomes and jars that seemed to watch with mute judgment. The only sound that dared break the weight was from Lysandra herself, her breaths drawn slow and measured, hands pressed flat against the table as she worked through the deep breathing exercises of her craft. Each inhale, each exhale, deliberate—part ritual, part survival, the method of a woman who had learned that if she didn't master her own body after touching the void, the void would master it for her. Her posture softened only slightly, but the fine tremor in her fingers betrayed the strain she carried.

After what felt like hours measured in pounding heartbeats, Lysandra finally spoke, her voice calm but heavy, as though still resonant with echoes of the spirit's torment. "The spirits have spoken." The words hung in the air, cold and final, leaving no comfort in their wake. Arthur moved first, pushing himself up with a grim expression, the lines of his face harder than before, like stone set against the storm. "We need to get to work. There's much to do." His voice was steady, sober, each syllable weighted with resolve. It was as though the haunting vision had burned the drink from his blood, stripping him back to iron and leaving nothing but purpose behind.

Syloki remained frozen, her hands still splayed on the table, knuckles white, her breath coming too shallow to be of use. The images replayed in her mind—the way the ghost's eyes had burst

red, the stench of rust and poison thick in her throat, the impossible way his body had bent before it melted away. She didn't notice Arthur until his shadow crossed hers, until his calloused hand extended down into her line of sight. Her eyes flicked up, and for the first time that night, the solidity in his gaze steadied her more than words could. She slipped her hand into his, fingers trembling as he pulled her gently to her feet.

Her voice came small, uneven, the bravado gone from her tone. "Th-thank... thank you, miss Lysandra," she managed, the syllables catching in her throat as if the air itself resisted leaving her lungs. Lysandra only gave a solemn nod, her eyes sharp and assessing even in exhaustion, a silent acknowledgment that what had passed could not be undone, only carried. Syloki leaned slightly toward Arthur as though afraid her knees might still betray her, but his presence was a solid anchor, and together they turned toward the exit, leaving the sanctum behind.

The stairway creaked under their steps, the dim glow of spirit wards still faintly clinging to the walls as though reluctant to die. The door opened, and the night air rushed at them, cold, damp, and blessedly ordinary compared to what they had just endured. They stepped out into Crow's Foot's narrow street, the world smelling of wet cobblestones and soot instead of blood and brimstone. For a long moment, neither spoke. They stood side by side in the shadow of the modest house, the quiet between them as thick as the fog rolling low across the ground. Syloki wrapped her cloak tighter, her chest still trembling with uneven breaths, her wide eyes darting back toward the door they had just closed.

Arthur stood with arms folded, his gaze lifted to some distant horizon only he could see, the weight of responsibility drawing hard lines into his face. Syloki, stealing a glance at him in the lamplight, saw not just his steel but the cracks under it—the grief, the guilt, the grim determination that had taken the place of whatever softness he might once have had. She bit the inside of her lip, her hand brushing against his sleeve as if testing whether she was truly still tethered to the here and now. She could only process so much at once, but one truth pressed through the haze: they were in this together now, whether either of them liked it or not. And as the silence stretched, it was that thought, more than the night air, that steadied her trembling.

The darkened streets of Crow's Foot seemed even more foreboding as they stepped into the night, the damp air pressing down like a shroud, the lamps burning weak through coils of mist. Every shadow stretched long and jagged across the cobblestones, every flicker of light looked like it wanted to vanish. Their minds raced with the implications of the spirit's warning, the echo of Marcio's broken voice still rattling like chains in their chests. Syloki hugged her cloak close, her words coming out quick, edged with adrenaline and resolve. "We need to uncover those hidden truths, whatever it takes." Her tone carried that reckless urgency she never quite managed to hide, her eyes darting around the alley as though the truth itself might be written on the walls.

Arthur rubbed his temples, his rough fingers dragging down the scruff of his beard as though the pressure there might force clarity into his skull. "Agreed," he said at last, his voice steady but heavy, each word ground out like metal under a whetstone. "We'll start by exploring the past, finding those wounds Marcio spoke of. We can't let Valesque's chaos consume Doskvol." His shoulders rolled back as though bracing for the burden, his silhouette broader, heavier in the dim light. The name alone carried enough weight to bend the air between them, a reminder of the wolf that had been loosed among them again.

Syloki, always quick to fill silence, tried to lighten it, though her voice betrayed a faint tremor under the attempt. "And don't forget to take care of yourself, Xavier. You look rough." Her lips tugged at a smile that almost landed, though her eyes betrayed the worry beneath, studying him too long in the flickering gaslight. Arthur gave a tired huff that was half a laugh, half resignation, the corner of his mouth lifting in something that passed for a smile. "I'm aware," he muttered, the

faintest hint of humour cutting through the gravel in his voice. “I need to go home and sober up properly. And maybe take a shower. Thanks for the reminder.” His eyes glinted briefly, catching hers, as though admitting more with that look than with the words.

“Good,” Syloki replied, letting the faint smile settle on her lips, though it carried a shade of warmth he probably didn’t notice. “And try not to get lost in that awful bottle, or at least pick something more fruity. We need you sharp for this.” Her voice tripped between teasing and sincere concern, her hand brushing the edge of her cloak nervously, fingers curling like they wanted to reach toward him but thought better of it. Her gaze lingered on him a moment too long before she looked back toward the crooked line of the street, forcing herself to break the spell of silence that kept wanting to bind them.

As they parted ways, the weight of their mission pressed down like the fog itself, cold, damp, and relentless. The threat of Merrow Valesque loomed like a shadow with teeth, gnawing at the edges of the city. The labyrinth of Doskvol seemed alive, the alleys twisting, the rooftops leaning in as though listening, every corner holding whispers of doom. Arthur walked one way, his boots striking with the sound of quiet conviction, his figure receding into the glow of half-dead lamps. Syloki lingered for a beat, her eyes locked to the broad line of his shoulders until distance turned him to a dark silhouette.

She turned too, pulling her cloak tighter, the street swallowing her steps as she made for her own uncertain path. Yet instinct—or something more—pulled them both to glance back at the same moment. Their eyes caught across the space between, holding a brief silence more potent than words. No oaths were sworn, no promises made, but the nods they exchanged bore the weight of both. Then they turned, disappearing into opposite directions of the city, their paths diverging yet bound by the same fire waiting to rise. Doskvol seemed to breathe with them, a living labyrinth that would test every step of their resolve.

Chapter 9: **The Ghost You Carry**

The air of Silkshore felt different the closer Syloki got to the Shadowed Sanctum. The night had teeth here, the shadows clinging longer than they should, every gaslamp hissing with a low, sickly flame that seemed to bend away from the mansion looming ahead. The gothic spires cut into the sky, gargoyles leering down like they'd been waiting centuries for her arrival. She felt the weight of unseen eyes long before the door opened, a Sister in a black veil motioning her inside without a word. The heavy oak doors swung shut behind her with a groan that sounded too deliberate, too final, like the house itself was swallowing her. The corridor she stepped into was narrow, lined with faintly glowing sigils carved into the stone, and she swore she heard a faint whisper curling out of the marks. Her guide didn't pause, her footsteps silent on the floor while Syloki's own stomped like a drum in the silence. She tugged her cloak tighter around herself and muttered under her breath, "Well, cozy place you've got here. Very… homey," as though the shadows might laugh along.

They moved deeper into the sanctum, the corridors bending like the ribs of some great beast. Syloki tried not to stare too long at the flickering tapestries, but the eyes stitched into them followed her no matter where she stood, shimmering faintly like they were alive. She cleared her throat, deciding that silence made her skin itch, and chirped, "Do you do your own embroidery? Very detailed. If you ever need a hand, I'm good at stitching socks. Not… souls or curses. Just socks." Her voice bounced oddly against the stone, as if even the air wanted her words gone. Her guide offered no response, only pulling open a heavy curtain to reveal the chamber ahead. A gust of perfumed air hit her, thick with incense and burnt herbs that clawed at her throat. The bubbling of something viscous echoed faintly, like a pot cooking too long in a kitchen she had no wish to see. She squared her shoulders, telling herself she belonged here, even as her stomach knotted.

The Witching Parlor was exactly the sort of place that legends made sound worse than it really was, except here it was worse than the legends. The chamber opened wide, its ceiling swallowed in shadow, walls layered with ancient tapestries so heavy they seemed to bleed darkness. At the far end sat Lira Quinval herself, in a high-backed chair carved with arcane symbols, her presence eclipsing everything else in the room. She wore black like a second skin, her pale hands draped over the arms of her seat, her eyes gleaming with an unstable mix of curiosity and threat. To her right leaned Pamela Veyron, hair red as autumn flame, her calm expression at odds with the faint green tendrils curling up from under her sleeves. On the left stood Stephany Johnes, sharp-eyed and hawkish, her jaw clenched as though daring Syloki to falter. Syloki swallowed hard, smiled too brightly, and blurted, "Lovely décor. You ladies do all the redecorating yourselves?"

Lira didn't answer at first. She simply tilted her head, studying Syloki the way one might study a rat that had wandered into a serpent's nest. The silence stretched long enough for Syloki to feel every thud of her heartbeat, so she kept talking, because that was her curse. "I mean, it's impressive. The atmosphere really says, 'Welcome to the family, please don't run screaming.' And the lighting—very moody, perfect for secrets. If I had a place like this, I'd never get any work done. Too busy staring at all the spooky tapestries, wondering which one would come alive and eat me first." Stephany's lips curled slightly at that, not quite amusement, not quite disgust, but Lira's face remained a mask. Pamela simply let her eyes close, inhaling the incense as if Syloki's nervous rambling wasn't worth noticing.

The bubbling cauldron in the corner belched a puff of strange steam, sharp and metallic, making Syloki cough lightly into her sleeve. She used it as an excuse to keep going. "That smells… interesting. What's in there? Secret recipe? You don't have to tell me, of course. I mean, if I had

a cauldron, I'd probably just make soup. Potato and leek, maybe. Unless the dead prefer something spicier?" Her laugh cracked halfway, betraying her nerves, but she forced it into something that sounded almost playful. The sound skittered across the chamber and died like a moth in flame. Lira's eyes flicked toward her then, just slightly, a flash of something sharp enough to make Syloki's shoulders stiffen. She told herself she'd scored a point—any response was better than being ignored.

Her guide stepped back into the shadows, leaving her alone before the three women. Syloki tugged at her sleeve, smoothed down her cloak, and tried to stand tall despite feeling like a child in a lion's den. "So, um, thank you for seeing me," she said, shifting her weight from foot to foot. "I know you must get a lot of… applicants? Is that the right word? People wanting to join you. And I'm not saying I'm special, but I am saying I work hard, I learn fast, and I don't scream too loudly when things get weird. Which I'm guessing is… always." The words tumbled out like stones, graceless but honest. Pamela's lips twitched, as though she were hiding a smile, but Lira's gaze cut her back into silence with the barest flicker of irritation.

Lira finally moved, one hand lifting from her throne's armrest to toy with the pendant at her throat. Her voice came low and even, carrying a weight that made the air tighten. "You talk too much," she said, and though the words were simple, they landed like a verdict. Syloki felt her stomach twist but forced a grin, raising her hands in mock surrender. "Guilty as charged. Talking keeps me from fainting. And trust me, you'd hate it if I fainted—I'm heavy, and dragging me out of here would be a nightmare." Stephany made a sharp, derisive sound in her throat, but the corner of Pamela's mouth curved more openly now, as though Syloki's clumsy levity was at least entertaining. The contrast between their expressions only made Lira's stillness more oppressive.

Trying to fill the silence, Syloki let her eyes wander again over the chamber, desperate for something else to focus on. "These tapestries—beautiful. And creepy. Mostly creepy. But you know, people say all kinds of lies about you Sisters. How you're cruel, or wicked, or worse. But honestly? You don't seem cruel to me." She shrugged, her voice softening, a hint of genuine warmth sneaking through. Lira's gaze lingered on Syloki, a measured stillness that weighed heavier than any outburst could. When she finally spoke, her voice was low and resonant, carrying the kind of authority that did not need to rise in pitch to command obedience. "Why do you want to join the Sisters?" she asked, the words curling like smoke, deceptively calm but sharp enough to cut. Syloki straightened in her chair, tugged her cloak tighter around her, and forced herself to answer without tripping over her own tongue. "I'm new in town," she began, her tone light but her eyes betraying nerves. "I don't know much yet. Trying to get work, but this city isn't exactly… welcoming to women. Not unless you're quiet and compliant, and I've never been very good at either." Her laugh came quick, small, not quite steady, as though she hoped humor might soften the edges of her truth.

Pamela leaned forward slightly, her emerald eyes narrowing, the faint green tendrils still curling lazily from beneath her sleeves. Her voice was smooth, almost languid, but carried a sharpness that cut through the incense-thick air. "That's a weak reason. Doskvol is full of opportunities for anyone who truly looks for them." Syloki chewed the inside of her cheek, nodded quickly, and tried to recover before the silence grew oppressive again. "Oh, I know, I know. Opportunities everywhere. I've just got a terrible talent for stepping on the wrong stones. And here in Doskvol, the stones seem to be hidden under some… very dank rocks." She gestured vaguely toward the tapestries, her grin hopeful. The joke landed with the weight of a corpse, and the silence that followed made her ears burn. Even Pamela's eyes, which had almost softened, flicked away dismissively, as if humor had no place here.

Syloki's fingers fidgeted on her lap, picking at an invisible thread on her cloak. She filled the void with words, as she always did when nerves clawed at her throat. "But really, I'm not trying to be

flippant. This city's shadows are thick, and I just want to survive in them without being crushed. I thought—well, I thought maybe the Sisters could help me do that. Give me a place to stand, a place to learn." Her voice wavered slightly at the end, the sincerity bleeding through despite her attempt at levity. Stephany scoffed, her hawkish features tightening further as she crossed her arms. "She really does talk too much," she said flatly, her eyes never leaving Syloki. But Lira gave no reply, her stillness like ice, her eyes locked on Syloki as if peeling away her layers one by one.

"I know, I know," Syloki blurted suddenly, throwing her hands up in a gesture half defense, half confession. "When I'm nervous, I talk. Can't help it. It's like… some people faint, some people freeze. Me? I ramble. And right now, sitting here in front of you three? Oh, I'm nervous. Terrified, actually." She laughed again, a fragile little sound that trembled on the air before dying in the incense haze. "But if I don't talk, then I start thinking too much, and when I think too much, I make mistakes. So, I talk." She shrugged, as if that explained everything. Her honesty came clumsy and bare, but it carried a weight of truth that made Pamela glance sideways at Lira, measuring her reaction.

Lira finally shifted, her hands releasing the pendant at her throat as she leaned forward slightly, her voice cutting into the space like a blade. "What makes you think you belong in a place built by women who lost everything?" The words were calm, but beneath them hummed a subtle menace, the kind that made Syloki's breath catch in her chest. Her heart thudded hard, her mouth suddenly dry, but she forced herself to meet Lira's eyes. "Because I know what it is to lose," she said softly, her words unpolished, unprepared, but truer for it. "Not in the same way as all of you, maybe. But enough to understand what it does to a person. How it claws at you, empties you out, makes you feel like you'll never be whole again. I don't want to belong anywhere that hasn't been touched by that kind of hurt. Because then it wouldn't be real." Her voice cracked, just slightly, but she held herself steady, as if daring Lira to see through her.

Syloki continued to talk, her words spilling faster the more the silence pressed down on her shoulders. She fidgeted with her sleeve, the way she always did when nerves twisted her insides, and tried to force a smile onto her lips. "I usually don't like belonging, I prefer to be free," she said, her voice light, a little too quick. "But you gals, you're something else. A haven for women in Doskvol, right? Witches, so they say. But I don't judge. Hell, I like me some magic stuff too. I don't think it's fair how they talk about the Sisterhood. If anything, you remind me of how the Royal Family gets talked about—more story than truth, more fear than fact." The moment the words left her, the air in the room shifted, the temperature dropping like ice water poured over her shoulders. Lira's fingers clenched around her pendant, her jaw tightening in a flash of rage so sudden it felt like the room itself recoiled.

Lira's gaze had been steady until then, sharp and cool like glass in moonlight, but the instant Syloki let those words slip, something cracked. The silence following her comparison was jagged, unnatural, as if even the walls of the Witching Parlor bristled at the insult. The faint glow of the wards along the chamber's edges pulsed harder, light flaring then dimming like a heartbeat quickening in anger. Lira's fingers tightened around the pendant at her throat until her knuckles blanched, her jaw locking so hard Syloki thought she might hear teeth splinter. Then came the voice—low, guttural, but slicing through the air with a force that nearly knocked the breath out of her. "You dare compare us to them?" The question wasn't a question at all; it was a knife, its edge honed with years of buried fury, and Syloki felt her spine stiffen against the chair as if the blade had nicked her throat.

Lira rose in one sudden motion, her presence filling the chamber so fully that Syloki forgot there were two other women watching. The candles sputtered, their flames bending away from her as if cowed, and the air seemed to plunge ten degrees colder in the space of a heartbeat. "The Royal Family are monsters," Lira spat, her tone suddenly sharp as glass breaking, each syllable

cutting the incense-heavy air. “Carrion that feeds on chaos, liars who dress their slaughter in spectacle. We are not them, and I will not hear their filth compared to us!” Syloki tried to speak, her mouth opening, words rushing to soften the mistake, but Lira’s fury gave her no space to breathe. “I–I meant—” Syloki stammered, her voice small, but Lira’s hand snapped up, silencing her as if her very will had clamped down on the air between them.

“You meant nothing!” Lira’s voice climbed, the wards at the corners of the room suddenly flaring with a sickly blue light, shadows along the walls writhing like angry serpents. “They will rot, do you hear me? Every last one of them!” She was trembling now, but it was not weakness—it was rage so condensed it had nowhere left to go. Her eyes, glinting like shards of broken glass, locked on Syloki with such intensity that it felt less like sight and more like a curse being leveled. Syloki lifted her hands, palms open, the instinctive motion of surrender, and managed a shaky, “I’m sorry—I only meant—” But Lira cut across her again, louder, angrier, each word shaking the chamber like a hammer striking steel.

“They will rot in hell!” she roared, her voice breaking with a crack that felt both human and inhuman, echoing through the tapestries until the embroidered faces on the walls seemed to sneer in unison. “Their ghosts will crawl from the dirt, and I will drag them into the circle myself! I will raise them screaming from their graves and kill them again, and again, and again!” Her hands lifted, fingers clawing the air as though she were already summoning their tormented shades, and Syloki’s breath caught in her throat. She could feel the energy building in the room, static raising the fine hairs on her arms, pressing against her lungs like the storm-heavy air before lightning strikes.

Syloki tried once more, voice trembling, “Lira, please—I didn’t mean it like that, I was nervous—” but her words cracked on themselves, swallowed by Lira’s fury before they could find air. Lira’s voice had become a torrent, pouring like molten iron, unstoppable and furious. “They will scream for release, and I will deny them! I will strip their flesh, chain their spirits, and drown them in an eternity of agony until even the gods turn away from their cries!” Her words shook Syloki to her bones, the cruelty of the vision terrifying in its detail. Pamela and Stephany stood utterly still, shadows across their faces, neither of them moving to stop Lira nor to ease Syloki’s growing terror.

It was in that moment, as Lira’s rage cracked through the sanctum like thunder, that Syloki realized this interview might have been the biggest mistake of her life. Her heartbeat rattled against her ribs, loud enough she thought Lira might hear it, and her stomach churned with the sickly weight of dread. She had thought herself brave, even clever, coming here with her questions and her charm. But as Lira loomed above her, eyes burning, voice spitting promises of endless torture, Syloki felt small—like a trespasser who had walked straight into the lion’s den and now found herself staring into jaws far wider, far sharper than she had imagined. Her fingers curled tightly around her knees, the only thing keeping her from bolting upright and running. It was only the knowledge that running would mean death that kept her rooted to the chair, eyes wide, throat tight, praying silently that the storm in Lira might burn itself out before it devoured her whole.

Syloki’s chair scraped against the stone floor as she pushed herself up, her hands trembling though she tried to steady them by clenching her fists at her sides. She couldn’t take it anymore—the oppressive heat of Lira’s rage, the wards humming, the sharp pressure of eyes watching her every twitch. Her chest rose and fell too fast, breath catching like she was drowning, and she turned toward the door with every intent of leaving, even if it meant running through the night until her legs gave out. But before she could even reach the threshold, the heavy wooden door slammed shut with a violent crack that echoed like thunder through the chamber, sealing her inside. Syloki jumped, her heart leaping into her throat, and her eyes darted back to Lira, who hadn’t even lifted a finger. The power in the room itself had obeyed her

rage, and Syloki's knees nearly buckled as she realized she was trapped, caught like a moth in a jar.

Lira's voice followed, sharp and heavy, filling the silence that the door's slam had carved out. She didn't shout this time, but the words were no less suffocating for their calm delivery. "If you think you can walk in here and speak so carelessly," she said, her tone low and dangerous, like coals cooling to embers but still hot enough to scorch, "then tell me—what have you lost? What would you give to belong here?" The weight of the question hit Syloki like a fist to the chest, forcing the air out of her lungs. She opened her mouth to answer, her throat dry, words scraping against fear, but before she could force anything out, another voice cut clean across the room.

It was Pamela. Calm, steady, almost clinical, and yet sharp as a blade. "Her son, Lira." The words dropped into the chamber like a stone into still water, and the ripples they caused were instant and undeniable. Lira's rage froze mid-breath, her lips parting but no sound emerging. Her shoulders stiffened, the iron coil of her anger snapping taut before dissolving into something else entirely—something raw, almost brittle. The wards that had been flaring moments ago flickered uncertainly, their glow dimming back into a faint pulse as if they too had been silenced. The silence that followed was deafening, thick enough that Syloki could hear her own pulse pounding in her ears, and every Sister present seemed suspended in that stillness, waiting for what would come next.

Syloki's eyes widened, her lips trembling as if Pamela had just ripped open a wound she'd fought hard to keep hidden. For a moment she thought to deny it, to laugh it off with her usual bumbling charm, but the weight of the room left no space for lies. Her arms folded around her chest in a protective knot, her fingers clutching at her own sleeves as though holding herself together. She glanced to Pamela, eyes burning, both gratitude and anger flickering there, then down to the cold stone floor, unable to meet Lira's piercing stare. She wanted to run again, but her legs were stone, her body anchored by the truth now dangling in the air like a blade.

"Go on, Syloki," Pamela said then, her voice firmer now, almost commanding, though not cruel. "Tell us what you told me earlier." Her words weren't an offer; they were an order, and Syloki felt the walls press closer at the sound of them. She swallowed hard, her throat dry and raw, and staggered back toward the chair she had so desperately wanted to abandon only a moment ago. The wood creaked as she lowered herself, her body folding down like it weighed far more than it should. Her knees drew together, her shoulders hunched, every part of her body language radiating pain she couldn't disguise this time, not with humor or chatter.

She looked small then, dwarfed by the grandeur of the Witching Parlor, her messy bravery dimmed into something quieter, something heartbreakingly human. Her gaze darted between the three women, each watching her with different eyes—Pamela with a strange, knowing calm, Stephany with narrowed curiosity, and Lira with that frozen silence, unreadable now that her fury had cracked. Syloki's lips parted once, closed again, her voice catching before it could rise. She pressed a hand to her chest as though steadying her heart, then exhaled, and the faintest sound emerged, the prelude to confession.

The Sanctum was still, the air heavy, as if the very shadows leaned closer to listen. All the masks she wore—her chatter, her clumsy jokes, her reckless bravado—had slipped, and what sat in that chair now was raw truth aching to be spoken. Syloki blinked hard, her lashes wet, but she didn't wipe her eyes. She was about to open up, not just to them, but to herself. Her whole body showed the pain before her words ever came, and the Gloam Sisters knew it. For the first time in a long while, the Witching Parlor wasn't filled with magic, but with something far more dangerous—honesty.

And in that silence, it was clear that whatever Syloki was about to say next would either bind her to them or break her completely.

Syloki sat there hunched forward, fingers twisting the hem of her cloak so tightly the fabric groaned in protest. Her throat worked around words that wanted to stay buried, but the silence in the room was merciless—it demanded truth, and she felt it pressing against her chest like a weight she could no longer carry alone. She licked her lips, swallowed hard, and let out a shaky laugh that died almost immediately. “Alright… fine,” she began, her voice catching. “You want to know what I’ve lost? Everything. More than I ever thought I could.” Her eyes darted up, then away, unable to meet Lira’s piercing stare. “I’m not from here. I’m from the Imperial City. Born and raised among its smoke and its lies. I used to be a private investigator there, thought I was clever enough to survive. Thought I’d figured out life.” She shook her head, strands of hair sticking to her damp cheek. “For a while, I even did. I had a husband… a good man. And a son. Fournier. My boy.”

Her voice cracked on his name, and her fingers loosened their grip on the cloak as if the sound itself had robbed her of strength. She blinked hard, lashes wet, and forced herself to keep talking. “But it didn’t last. He was young, still learning his first words when everything fell apart. I watched my husband get murdered right in front of me. Do you know what that does to a person?” Her gaze finally rose, wild and broken, bouncing between the three Sisters as though daring them to say they understood. “It tore me open. I spent every waking hour hunting down the bastard who did it. Every lead, every shadow, I chased it like it was the only thing keeping me alive. And in a way, it was. I found him. I got him. But it came at a cost so high I’m still paying it.”

She leaned back now, hands shaking in her lap, her breathing ragged as the words poured out. “Because while I was drowning myself in vengeance, I lost Fournier. I lost him without even realizing it was happening. My boy—my sweet, innocent boy—they said it was safer to take him away. And they were right. I was… gone. Lost in drink, in powders, in anything that could numb the pain. An addiction that hollowed me out. I wasn’t a mother anymore, just a shell rattling with rage.” Her voice trembled but didn’t break, held together by a stubborn thread of defiance. “They took him because it was safer, and I can’t even blame them. I failed him. I failed the only thing that mattered.”

Syloki straightened then, her chin lifting despite the tears threatening to spill. “But I’m not that woman anymore. I’ve fought my way back. I’ve cleaned myself up. I’ve recovered—by the Spirits, I swear it. I’m better now. And I’ve been searching for him ever since. Fournier. My son.” She pressed her palm to her chest, over her heart, as though the name itself lived there. “The last clues I’ve scraped together point here. Doskvol. Somewhere in this cursed city, he’s alive. I know it. And if he’s here, if he’s really here, I’ll find him. I have to.”

Her words spilled faster now, as though fear itself was pushing them out before they could turn back into silence. “But here’s the thing. My work, the cases I take, they led me to Doskvol too. The latest trail was following this man called Olly, who turned out to be connected to Elias Wren. And Elias—well, apparently he’s all tangled up with Merrow Valesque. The terror of Doskvol. The one everyone whispers about but never wants to name.” She let out a bitter laugh, short and ugly. “So now, here I am. Afraid that if I don’t stop Merrow before his chaos eats this city alive, I’ll lose Fournier forever—before I even get the chance to see his face again.”

Her shoulders slumped as if the weight of everything she had just said finally settled over her, but she wasn’t finished. “That’s why I came here. Why I’m standing in front of you instead of running the other way like any sane woman would. I think the Gloam Sisters can help me. Not just in stopping Merrow, but in finding Fournier. Maybe even in keeping him safe after I do. I can’t do this alone. I’ve tried, and it nearly killed me once already.” Her eyes, shimmering with

desperation, locked on Lira's at last. "You can give me something I don't have. Knowledge. Power. The kind of tricks that make the rest of the world step back. And I'll do whatever it takes to learn them."

Syloki's hands finally stilled in her lap, fingers curling into fists. She leaned forward, the smallest spark of her reckless bravado breaking through her trembling voice. "I don't plan on staying forever. I don't need a crown or a throne. I just want to be dangerous enough that no one will ever touch my boy again. Dangerous enough that even Merrow himself would think twice before looking my way. That's the truth of it. That's why I'm here." She swallowed, her throat tight, her body tense as a bowstring. "I want to be as scary, as deadly, as you, Lira Quinval."

Her words hung in the air, naked and raw, stripped of her usual humor and clumsy charm. It wasn't a plea, though it sounded close—it was a vow, born of grief, guilt, and unyielding love. And for the first time since she walked into the Sanctum, Syloki wasn't talking to fill the silence. She was talking because silence had become unbearable.

The room stood in silence now, the kind of silence that pressed against the ears and made the heart pound louder than footsteps in an empty hall. For the first time since stepping foot into the Sanctum, Syloki welcomed it. Her shoulders slowly dropped from their tight hunch, and she drew a careful breath, letting it out with trembling control. She steadied herself in that silence, forcing her lungs to work in rhythm, her fingers to still their nervous twitch. She closed the dam that had burst wide open, shutting the flood of her confessions back where they belonged. There was nothing else left to say, no more stories to spill onto the cold stone floor. What she had laid bare was enough to damn her or save her, and she could do nothing but wait.

She sat back into her chair, the wood creaking beneath her, and folded her hands together in her lap with deliberate composure. The air still thrummed with the echoes of her words, thick with the taste of grief that refused to dissipate. Shadows clung heavier to the corners, as though even the wards themselves hesitated to intrude on the weight of what had been spoken. Syloki's eyes remained downcast for a moment before lifting, darting from face to face, searching for judgment, mercy, or wrath in equal measure.

Stephany's lips curved into a small smile, faint but genuine, the kind of expression that told Syloki her words had not fallen on deaf ears. It wasn't pity—Stephany looked at her like she had just proven herself, like her wounds were scars worth admiring rather than stains to be hidden. Syloki's chest tightened with both relief and fresh nerves at that smile, unsure if it meant approval or the beginning of something worse. Pamela, on the other hand, was unreadable now, her face blank as glass, her sharp eyes offering neither kindness nor cruelty.

And Lira—Lira was stone itself. Her features carved into stillness, her eyes piercing through Syloki with the intensity of a blade pressed to the skin but not yet cutting. That mask of command held, but only just. Syloki swore she saw a tremor ripple across her jaw, the smallest betrayal of something shifting beneath. Lira's fingers brushed the pendant at her throat again, holding it tightly as if anchoring herself against some unseen storm.

The silence dragged, and Syloki's throat ached to fill it with words, but she resisted this time. She forced herself to keep still, to let them speak first, to let the weight of her confession settle into the air as it was meant to. Her heart thudded like a drum inside her chest, but she pressed her lips together and only offered a small, almost invisible nod, as if to say: yes, I have spoken, and I will not take it back.

Eventually, Lira's voice cut through the silence like a blade through cloth, low and measured but carrying with it an echo of something that startled Syloki—a softness she had not expected. "You carry a ghost heavier than any I could summon." The words were not a compliment, nor

were they a condemnation. They were recognition, a rare thing in this house of shadows. They landed heavy in Syloki's gut, and for once, she had no clever answer.

Syloki looked at her, lips parting slightly as though she might speak, but no words came. Instead, she gave a slow nod, her eyes glimmering with both acceptance and exhaustion. She didn't need to argue or defend herself anymore. She didn't need to prove the truth of her story, because it was already there, plain in the air between them. Lira had seen it, heard it, felt it.

The silence returned, but it was a different silence now. Not the tense anticipation of judgment, but the raw, fragile quiet of two people who understood pain all too well. Syloki let it rest, her nod lingering like a vow unspoken.

Lira turned at last, her gaze sweeping from Syloki back to the two women who flanked her. Her voice was steady again, though not as cold as before, carrying a tone of quiet authority that filled the Witching Parlor. "Let's arrange her one of the bedrooms on the third floor of the Gloam manor. The one over the south side, the far one. I think she will like that location." Pamela tilted her head slightly, a small smile tugging at her lips as she folded her arms. "It faces the trees and the canal. That's a nice view," she added softly, as if the suggestion was not only practical but a gesture of rare kindness. The shadows around them seemed to shift with the weight of the decision, the oppressive silence of earlier thinning just a fraction.

Lira continued, her fingers brushing the pendant at her throat as though sealing the words with the same iron weight she had carried moments before. "We will initiate her. See if she lasts the first few tasks. Once she is good enough at those, assign one of the Sisters to shadow her, teach her the basics." Her tone was crisp, businesslike, though a flicker of something softer lingered in her eyes, quickly masked again. The words were not just an order; they were the drawing of a boundary. This was not yet full trust, but it was a door, cracked open to let Syloki step inside.

Stephany leaned forward, her smile widening faintly, her voice carrying a mischievous edge. "Maybe that Sheila chick? She's getting quite good. The two will get along quite well. I can see already their personalities match." She let the words hang with a teasing lilt, her eyes darting to Syloki before settling on Lira again. There was no resistance in her tone, no doubt—Stephany seemed almost amused at the notion, already envisioning how the new addition would stumble or thrive under another Sister's watchful eye.

As the three women discussed her fate as if she were not even in the room, Syloki's eyes flicked from one face to the other, her mouth tightening into a thin line. She felt like a ghost at her own trial, every decision about her future laid out as though she had no voice. Her fingers fidgeted against the fabric of her skirt, her shoulders shifting restlessly, until she could no longer hold it in. Her voice broke through their conversation, small but insistent. "Excuse me, sorry. Does that mean what I think it means?" The words slipped out sharper than she had intended, tinged with both nerves and disbelief.

The three Sisters turned back to her in unison, their gazes falling on her with the weight of judgment. Lira's eyes lingered the longest, steady and unreadable, before she finally spoke. "You may remain. But remember, Syloki—secrets are our lifeblood. Betray them, and even the dead won't carry your name." Her voice softened, yet the edge in it remained like a knife beneath velvet. She added, her eyes narrowing, "We will carry your secret with you, but you will also carry our secrets with yourself from now on." The words landed heavy, a pact made not with ink or blood but with silence and shadow.

Syloki's breath caught, her chest tightening as relief crashed through her like a tide breaking against stone. She couldn't stop the sound that tore from her throat—a squeal, raw and unfiltered, that could only be interpreted as happiness, even if it broke the solemnity of the

moment. Her cheeks flushed hot, but she didn't care. The weight she had been carrying felt lighter, if only just, as if she had finally pried open a door she had been banging against for too long.

Pamela's lips curved into a crooked smirk, her eyes glittering with humor as she leaned back. "Welcome to the sisterhood, Sister," she said, her voice dripping with sarcasm, the word *sisterhood* stretched in mockery. It was a jab, a reminder of Syloki's earlier fumbling words, but it carried no real malice. If anything, it was a test of how easily she could bear a jest in the face of sharp company.

Syloki let the sarcasm roll off her, her smile broadening despite the sting. She had a foot in now. She had paid for it with her most painful truth, had been laid bare in front of three women who could destroy her in an instant, but she had it all the same. Vulnerability had been the price of entry, and she had walked the line without breaking. Whatever came next, she would endure it—because at last, she had pried her way into the heart of the Gloam Sisters.

Chapter 10: **Shadows of the Past**

It had been a week since the interview, and Syloki still caught herself wondering if she'd gone mad the night she said yes to the Gloam Sisters. At the time it had sounded brilliant, the sort of clever gamble she liked to believe she was good at—stand with the strongest crew in Doskvol, pick up a little magic, and grow into something more than a nervous chatterbox with sharp instincts. Arthur needed someone beside him who wasn't just stumbling around half-blind, not if Merrow was truly as dangerous as the whispers and her own visions had painted him. She'd read everything she could since that night under Lysandra's guidance, turned page after page until her eyes stung, and still it clung to her dreams like smoke. This place felt like her chance to do something about it. And the truth was, she hadn't expected to feel comfortable here, but the Sanctum had surprised her. She had a room of her own, no mold, no cold dripping walls—clean blankets, hot tea, a vanity with powders and brushes like some noble's chamber. The sort of little luxuries she had only ever seen when spying through windows. For once she could eat, drink, and sleep without worrying what corner of the city might crush her next.

The studying was the part she hadn't thought she'd enjoy but quickly found herself pulled into. Magic wasn't sermons or rituals carved in blood like so many whispered in Doskvol's taverns—it was everywhere. That was what startled her first. The Sisters explained, or rather the books did, since her tutor had the charm of a brick wall, that magic was not a gift doled out by spirits or gods. It was the air itself, threaded through stone, fire, and thought. Any living creature could brush against it, some more clumsy than others, some without ever knowing they had. Syloki scribbled notes in her awkward hand, pages filling with her own crooked sketches, trying to map what was instinct and what was skill. The difference mattered. Instinct was the tiny, accidental things most people barely noticed: a lie detector's gut twinge, a sudden tug in a conversation that made others listen harder, a candle's flame twitching away from a breath. Skill was learning to take that spark and make it burn at will.

She was surprised by how common it seemed once she knew what to look for. Influence and persuasion, spoken words that bent a listener's mood—this was one of the most natural forms, they said, and she thought about every time she'd slipped a half-truth past a thug or soothed a child's panic. Shadows and light were the next easiest to tug. A hallway that grew darker when no lamps went out, a flicker in the corner of the eye when no one was there. Some Sisters whispered that every child in the city played with shadows without knowing it, stretching them into monsters on the wall, believing the shapes real. The idea thrilled and unnerved Syloki in equal measure. She had spent so much of her life thinking magic was something other, distant. Now she was told it was part of every careless breath.

And if someone chose to lean into it, to study it, then the sparks grew sharper. The texts described a dozen paths, some she underlined twice just for the awe of it: shadow-beasts born out of the mind's own imagination, willed into form until they clawed at the air; flames summoned not with oil or spark but with will alone, sudden combustion from fingertips; and the darkest of them all, pulling the dead back into the light, not just as memory but as shuddering flesh or whispering spirit. Syloki traced those passages again and again, chewing the end of her pen, whispering to herself that she'd seen half of this with her own eyes already. In Gaddwick

Station, in alleys where whispers turned into screams. She wasn't walking into fiction; she was cataloguing the horrors she'd already glimpsed.

Her tutor sighed every time she interrupted with questions, muttering as if Syloki were a gnat buzzing around her ear. But Syloki didn't care. She had questions stacked higher than the bookshelves themselves. Why shadows bent to will but not always to reason, why lies were harder to speak when truth pressed close, why heat sometimes bloomed around her fingers when her anger rose. She thought maybe her rambling chatter, the curse she'd never shaken, was itself brushing against this thing—magic slipping out through her voice. The Sisters never answered plainly, but the books gave her enough to suspect she might not be wrong. The thought made her both giddy and uneasy.

By the third day she had Sheila Crawford at her side, and thank the Spirits for that. Sheila didn't roll her eyes at every question, didn't sigh like every word Syloki spoke was a burden. She was warm, bright, even funny, and Syloki clung to that like a lifeline in the shadow-cloaked manor. They pored over texts together, Sheila steering her toward answers without snapping her nose against the page. When Syloki laughed at her own nervous jokes, Sheila actually laughed too, which made the books seem less like grave markers and more like doors. The two of them became an odd pair—Syloki too loud, Sheila calmly patient—but it was the first time Syloki felt like maybe she wasn't drowning alone in this vast, heavy place.

The manor itself loomed above the city, a crooked crown of spires that stabbed into the sky. Three floors of chambers, each with its own secrets, and then more beneath. The third was the Sisters' private space, corridors lined with doors that each hid a life Syloki couldn't yet imagine. The second was the library, where she spent hours until her head buzzed, shelves crammed with tomes so old their spines cracked at her touch. She felt tiny there, a girl scribbling her half-legible notes in the shadows of knowledge that could tear the city apart. But she kept reading, page after page, because for once she felt like she was learning how the world really turned, not just guessing in the dark.

It was when her lessons were done for the day that she learned the Sisters' power was not all ink and whispers. They told her the basement was where her "tasks" would begin, the place where every novice had to start, where study gave way to work. And though she hadn't yet seen what awaited her there, Syloki already knew, from the smell alone, that it was no place of books and candlelight. It was something far more grotesque.

Syloki was only ever allowed into one specific section of the basement, and the other Sisters had a name for it that made her stomach twist the first time she heard it—the Processing Plant. They spoke the words with a curl of amusement, like it was an inside joke only they understood, their lips bending into small, secret smiles. It was the only time Syloki had seen those girls show anything close to genuine delight, when they handed her down to that place and told her to make herself useful. Never with Sheila, and Syloki hated that more than she cared to admit. Sheila stayed upstairs, laughing softly at her jokes, steadying her hand on the pages of arcane texts. Down here, in the bowels of the manor, Syloki was alone with the rot. The air clung to her skin, damp and sour, steeped in the smell of old blood and spoiled meat. She learned quick that if she didn't mask it somehow, the stink would crawl up into her mouth and choke her. So she wrapped her face in a scarf, sprayed with one of her favorite scents pilfered from her little

makeup station upstairs. Every day she soaked that fabric, every day the sweet notes bled into the damp stone until it became the only comfort she had left in that hole.

It was a test, she knew it, though no one had said so out loud. A test of will, of nerve, of how much bile she could swallow before breaking. She squirmed, Spirits yes, she squirmed, gagged, even threw up down her front on the very first day when the sour stench caught her throat mid-breath and her hands slipped in something she refused to name. But she never quit. She forced herself back in the next morning, trembling but stubborn, jaw set in that way she used to wear when running down alleyways after marks twice her size. Strong will should have been her second name, someone once told her, back when compliments had still meant something. Down here she clung to that, knuckles white around the tools they shoved into her hands, fighting the urge to scream.

The tasks themselves made her skin crawl. Carcasses, endless piles of them, animals dragged from wherever the Sisters found them, swollen with rot or still warm with fading life. Syloki learned how to open them, how to scoop the slop of their insides into buckets without gagging, how to keep her hands steady even when they shook from revulsion. Sometimes she was told to strip them of specific pieces—wings sawed off with stiff hands, claws pried from bone, eyes plucked like rotten grapes. Her scarf couldn't block out the textures, the sounds, the way cartilage snapped when she twisted wrong. By the third day she could keep her stomach down, but her dreams carried the echoes—wet tearing, hollow sockets, the smell of meat turned sour.

On the fourth day, they decided to push her further. They gave her a dog's body, limp and reeking, and another head, severed but fresh enough that the eyes hadn't clouded yet. "Sew it," they told her, and nothing more. She wanted to laugh, wanted to call it madness, but the laughter caught in her chest and turned to a cough. She threaded her needle with trembling fingers, leaned over the dog, and pushed steel through skin. It was wrong, all wrong, every tug of the thread an insult to nature itself. The second head dangled loose, and she had to hold it in place with one hand while stitching with the other, sweat stinging her eyes, bile rising in her throat. The rules were strict, precise measurements, no sloppiness allowed. Awkward work, unnatural, her stitches tugging skin against skin until the two skulls seemed locked in some eternal snarl.

When it was done, she stepped back, her hands bloody, her arms trembling with strain. She hated herself for the thought that it looked… tidy. For the first time in her life, someone in the Sanctum gave her a compliment. "Good stitching," one of the Sisters remarked, flat but approving. The words landed like a slap. Syloki felt her chest tighten, bile rising again, but this time she swallowed it down, nodding stiffly as if the acknowledgment meant nothing. Inside she hated it, hated them for making her do it, hated herself for not failing on purpose. That was the first compliment she'd earned in this house, and it tasted like iron and shame.

Every moment she spent in that chamber stretched long, a grotesque parody of study. Her body rebelled against it, but she forced it through the motions, her mind whispering the same vow over and over: never quit, never surrender. She kept her eyes on the bigger prize. To walk away now would be to stay weak, to stay unready, and she would not let Merrow find her that way.. Not with Arthur relying on her to be more than some lost girl fumbling in the dark. If the price of strength was this humiliation, this grotesque trial by blood and stitch, then Syloki would pay it. She would carry the stink of that basement on her skin, carry the horror in her dreams, and keep

walking back down every morning. Because she had bigger goals, goals that would not let her quit. Not now, not ever.

Today Syloki sat tucked away in the furthest corner of the great library, legs crossed under the table, her fingers drumming against the wood in restless rhythm. The heavy silence of the room pressed down on her shoulders, broken only by the occasional flick of a page turned somewhere in the stacks. She thought to herself, *I really could use some tea right about now*, but she didn't even shift in her seat to act on it. That small comfort had been stripped from her after one clumsy spill over a vellum-bound tome of spirit theory—now drinks in hand were banned altogether inside the library. It left her throat dry and her nerves raw, and the book she held wasn't doing much to ease them. The "History of Doskvol, Volume III" droned on about bricks, city planning, and the proper spacing of sewer grates. Syloki squinted down at the print and muttered under her breath, "Riveting stuff. Whoever wrote this must've been the life of every party."

But today wasn't wasted, not by far. A rare opportunity sat only a few tables away. Lira Quinval herself was in the library, a sight Syloki had never quite expected to catch. The woman was seated straight-backed in a high chair, her long black coat falling like a second shadow around her. The candlelight seemed to bend toward her face, catching the sharp line of her jaw and the pale severity of her skin. Her hair, dark as storm-tossed night, spilled over one shoulder in a restless wave, though not a strand dared to make her look anything less than formidable. Even sitting still, she looked coiled, like a knife not yet drawn but ready in an instant. A book lay open in her hands, thick with age and bound in cracked leather, and her eyes devoured the words with an intensity that made the very air quiver. Lira's presence filled the space like firelight in a room full of kindling—quiet now, but everyone knew what would happen if it spread.

Syloki had been told, repeatedly, that the Gloam Sisters had no hierarchies, that they were all equals in the Sisterhood. But she had seen the truth in a hundred small moments—the subtle shift of posture when Lira entered a room, the way certain women deferred with their eyes down, the careful pauses in conversation when she passed by. Lira was the leader, whether anyone said it aloud or not. Pamela and Stephany commanded respect, yes, but Lira's shadow was the one they all lived under. Even Syloki, new as she was, felt the weight of it pressing against her spine now, just watching from afar. She curled her fingers tighter around her book, her nails biting the edge of the paper, as though to anchor herself in the present.

And yet, as her eyes wandered from the dull print to Lira's poised figure, Syloki's thoughts slid back to that night of her interview, the first and most searing test she had endured in this house. She remembered how Lira's voice had begun so calm, measured, almost motherly in its patience. For a moment Syloki had thought herself safe, thought she might even find comfort in the cadence of those words. Then she had mentioned the Royal Family. It had been nothing—just another nervous stumble, a name tossed out in her endless rambling—but the effect was immediate. Lira's entire being had transformed in an instant, the calm mask shattering into an explosive fury so sharp it felt like the room itself had clenched in on her. The rage had burned hotter than anything Syloki had ever witnessed, violent enough to make her believe for a heartbeat that she might not leave the Sanctum alive. That memory had dug itself deep, replaying in her mind when the nights grew too long and too still.

Now, across the hush of the library, Syloki stole another glance at the woman, her curiosity gnawing like an itch she couldn't scratch. She had never dared to bring up the Royal Family's name again, not even whispered in the halls, but the questions kept crowding her thoughts regardless. What had Merrow Valesque and his people done to her? Why did the mere mention of their name twist Lira into something monstrous? Syloki leaned her chin into her palm, letting her hair fall partly across her face as though it might shield her nosiness. She tried to bury herself again in the dull drivel of sewer layouts, but her eyes kept drifting back, her mind chewing on that unspoken secret like a devil perched on her shoulder. The library smelled of candlewax and dust, but in her head she could still smell that rage, taste the terror that had filled her lungs. And though she told herself to drop it, to bury her curiosity before it dragged her someplace dangerous, the thought of it was always there, whispering: *ask, find out, dig deeper.*

Syloki hesitated for a long moment, her eyes flicking between the dry words in her book and the sharp outline of Lira's face framed by the wavering candlelight. Her fingers tapped nervously against the page, betraying her restless thoughts as she weighed her options. Curiosity clawed at her ribs, a steady ache demanding to be fed, but every memory of that explosive rage during the interview whispered warnings into her ears. Still, Syloki had never been good at staying quiet when questions pressed against her tongue. Taking a large breath that trembled faintly at the edges, she murmured a small encouragement to herself, just enough to push her forward. She rose from her chair, smoothed her coat with both palms, and crossed the hush of the library, her footsteps loud in her own mind though they barely disturbed the silence. When she reached Lira's table, she leaned slightly forward and asked, voice low and shy, if it was all right for them to share the space. Lira never lifted her gaze from the cracked spine of her book, but her voice came short and direct, clipped in its patience: "Sure, go ahead."

The tone was brightened with an almost artificial lightness, the sort of bubbly cheer that felt placed deliberately in her words, as if put on for Syloki's sake rather than born from any real mood. It made the hair on the back of Syloki's neck twitch, a signal she ignored as she slid into the chair opposite, careful not to scrape it too loudly against the floor. She adjusted herself, rested her elbow on the table, and let the weight of her curiosity push her forward. "If you don't mind," she started, keeping her voice calm though her words came quickly, "I have a few curiosities about some things that maybe you might know. Am I allowed to ask you a question?" Lira's sigh drifted across the table like a warning, but still she didn't look up. Her eyes dragged steadily over the lines of her book before she answered, cool and practiced, "Syloki, I know you won't stop at just one. Go ahead, but don't expect much in the way of answers from me, okay?"

Syloki breathed deeply, her chest rising with the weight of determination, and she pulled the book closer to herself, flipping to a page she had already marked. She slid her finger down the passage until she found the words that had been needling her for days. She turned the book so it angled toward Lira, though she knew Lira wasn't looking. "You see this part? The Amusement Park of Barrowcleft," she said, the name tasting strange in the quiet of the library. "It describes the park as once being one of the great attractors of Doskvol, even outshining the seafood and Dreadwhale industries for a couple of years. But—" she leaned in slightly, her eyes darting to Lira's face for any flicker of attention, "—it has almost zero details about why it is abandoned today..." She let her voice trail off deliberately, unfinished, her question hanging unspoken in the space between them, heavy with intent. She hoped, prayed even, that Lira would finish her thought for her.

Without lifting her eyes from the page before her, Lira's voice slid into the silence, smooth but cold, almost as if she had recited these words too many times to ever feel them anymore. "It has been abandoned since the great fire," she said, her tone carrying the weight of fact without emotion. "Someone set fire and trapped people in too many rides. Kids were trapped there too. It was a massacre." Her hand tightened slightly on the edge of her book as she continued, though her face never lifted. "The Espiritas couldn't get there in time. Some sort of barricade. The place crawls with ghost hauntings now, almost unusable. The government isn't bothered to send a team of highly skilled whispers and exorcists to make it work again. It just sits there." Each word was steady, precise, but the lack of warmth turned the explanation into something chilling, as though she were reading straight out of some hidden ledger of tragedies, an endless catalog of horrors committed against the city.

Syloki sat there, quiet in her seat, staring at Lira while her mind churned with thoughts she didn't dare voice. The way Lira had said it—detached, rehearsed, almost automatic—scraped against her bones. It didn't feel like an answer pulled from memory, not really. It was more like a wall, smooth and polished, built from words meant to keep others out. Syloki shifted slightly, her hands finding the pages of her own book again, flipping back and forth between sections as if she might have missed something. Her lips pressed together in a thin line when she saw the truth: there was almost no mention of the fire, just a single, quiet note that the place had been abandoned. Nothing about the barricade. Nothing about children. Nothing about massacre. The details Lira had offered were nowhere to be found in the book. Syloki's eyes lingered on the blank absence of it all, and the silence between them grew sharp, like the sound of glass just before it breaks.

Syloki cleared her throat softly, her eyes sliding back to the page in her book though her mind was far from the printed words. Her mouth worked before her thoughts fully arranged themselves, as it often did when nerves pushed her forward. "You know," she began, her tone carrying that conversational lilt that tried to sound casual but came out too fast, "this must have been a very traumatic situation for anyone who was there. I mean, a fire, children, trapped rides… gods, just imagining it makes my stomach turn." She glanced sideways, watching Lira's face for even the smallest flicker of acknowledgment, but the other woman didn't stir, didn't glance, didn't even twitch. She was a statue carved in black cloth, her eyes pinned to her book. Syloki took the silence as a sort of invitation, the way she always did, and leaned forward slightly, her voice dropping to a rambling hum. "Maybe it's better off forgotten anyways. Maybe that's why so little's written down. It's funny though, isn't it? How memory manipulation is said to be one of the most common natural talents out there. Like maybe people just… accidentally discover it when they're trying to forget."

She paused there, letting the thought dangle in the air, half-expecting a response. Her eyes flicked to Lira again, searching for some small reaction, but still she was met with the unshaken calm of that page-turning presence. Lira might as well have been reading alone. So Syloki continued, shrugging to herself as she went. "I wonder if it's because of trauma. Like maybe the city's pain makes the talent stronger, more frequent. People don't want to remember what hurts, so they just… push it away, fold it up, tuck it into some shadow where it can't bother them anymore." She gave a weak chuckle, nervous and brittle, and shifted in her seat as though trying to make herself more comfortable. "It makes me wonder if there are lots of people out there using it, like an unspoken treatment for grief. Maybe whole neighborhoods walking around

without pieces of their past, gaps sewn up with this kind of—" she gestured vaguely with her fingers, "—mystical stitch-work. That's an interesting question, don't you think?"

Syloki's eyes darted again to Lira, the silence stretching like a rope pulled taut between them. She waited, her lips parting slightly as though ready to catch an answer before it even arrived, but all she received was the sound of a page turning, crisp and indifferent. She nodded faintly to herself, swallowing the quiet as though it had been meant for her all along. "Right, well, maybe not interesting to everyone," she added, her words tumbling onward with a sheepish little smile tugging at the corners of her mouth. She leaned her elbows on the table now, resting her chin lightly on the back of her hand, and let her voice lower, as though coaxing out some forbidden secret. "I mean, Doskvol is practically built on traumas. This city's bones are broken ones, stitched together with smoke and salt. Every crew's got their ugly little story, don't they? Some worse than others. I bet if you started digging, you'd find half the ghost population comes from the mistakes of gangs who thought they were bigger than the city itself."

Her tone lingered in the air, a thread pulling tighter as she drifted closer and closer to the edge she knew she shouldn't lean over. Her voice became almost conspiratorial now, like someone whispering secrets in a darkened room. "Some of them were just bad news from the start. Bad people doing worse things. Some of them made enemies that'll never die out. I suppose some names are still whispered in the corners, huh?" She let the suggestion hang there, carefully woven but vague enough to feign innocence. She drummed her fingers against the wooden table, her gaze flicking to Lira again, watching, testing the waters. The silence was still iron, still heavy, and Syloki chewed the inside of her cheek before continuing, her words picking up nervous speed.

"I mean, the way people talk about the Sisters sometimes, it reminds me of how people used to talk about some of the old gangs. Shadowed reputations, more story than truth. The lines blur, don't they? You hear one version from dockworkers, another from merchants, and the real story's probably buried six feet under with whoever they wronged. Like some families—"

Syloki's voice faltered, cut clean by the sudden lift of Lira's head. For the first time since Syloki had joined her, Lira's eyes rose from the book, and they landed on her with a force that stopped her words dead in her throat. The look was tight, a storm bottled in glass, fury pressed into perfect control. Her jaw set, the tendons in her neck drawn sharp, and though she didn't speak, the silent weight of her stare crashed down on Syloki, crushing the last syllable she'd nearly dared to say. The air between them bristled, and Syloki, frozen in place, let the unfinished word rot in her mouth, knowing she had wandered too close to something raw and dangerous.

After a tense exchange of looks, where Syloki could feel every hair on her arms bristle and stand upright, she scrambled for a way to soften the weight pressing down on her chest. Her lips parted, her voice faltering into something smaller, thinner, a whisper stitched with apology. "Sorry… sometimes I talk too much. I'm trying to control that." Her hands fidgeted nervously in her lap, twisting the hem of her sleeve, as though the motion might wring out the awkwardness she had just spilled across the table. Her eyes darted down to the open page in front of her, anywhere but those sharp eyes that had just cut her speech short, and she forced a smile that barely lifted one corner of her mouth, desperate to coax back the warmth she had once seen in Lira's face during that first interview.

Lira, however, did not grant her the mercy of softness. Her gaze lingered just a heartbeat longer, cold and unblinking, before her voice slid across the air like the edge of a blade. “The past is irrelevant unless it serves the present. There are always ghosts. Figures from the past who never seem to leave us, no matter how hard we try.” Her tone was even, practiced, but beneath it thrummed a weight that Syloki felt deep in her bones, as if the words weren’t spoken to her at all but to some specter haunting Lira alone. The words wrapped the air in ice, and Syloki, grasping for footing, nodded quickly, her voice too meek to rise above a murmur. “I agree,” she said, though her agreement was nothing but a shield against the sudden chill that had settled between them.

Before she could say anything more, before her mind could scramble for another fumbling attempt to bridge the silence, Lira closed her book with a sharp clap that made Syloki jump. The sound echoed across the cavernous library, a final punctuation to a conversation that was never truly allowed to begin. Lira stood, her long coat shifting around her legs like a ripple of shadow, her posture as severe and controlled as her words had been. She didn’t look at Syloki again, not directly, not with those eyes that had nearly scorched her into silence. Instead, she turned with a smooth, deliberate motion and began walking toward the grand staircase, her boots striking the floor with a rhythm that felt both final and dismissive.

Syloki’s gaze clung to her as she descended, her stomach twisting with the bitter taste of frustration. She had been right—her instincts screamed it as loud as the fire in her chest—Lira’s secrets were buried deep in the past, and the Royal Gang’s name was the key that rattled those chains. But Syloki also knew, as surely as she knew her own heartbeat, that no matter how much she pushed, she would never pry that truth from Lira’s lips directly. The woman was a fortress, her walls reinforced by rage, grief, and something else Syloki couldn’t yet name. Watching her vanish down into the shadows of the first floor was like watching the door slam on a treasure chest she would never be given the key to.

Left in the library’s hollow quiet, Syloki leaned back in her chair, exhaling a shaky breath she hadn’t realized she’d been holding. Her fingers drummed against the wooden table, restless and impatient, while her mind spun with the unanswered questions that burned hotter with every beat. If Lira wouldn’t speak of it, then Syloki would have to find another way, another angle, another loose thread to tug until the whole truth unraveled. She thought of Pamela’s calm, of Stephany’s sharpness, of Sheila’s warmth that made the mansion feel less suffocating. Somewhere among them, or in the whispers that clung to the very stones of this house, the story of what happened between the Gloam Sisters and the Royal Gang had to live.

Her lips pressed into a thin line, determination simmering beneath the weight of her earlier hesitation. She knew the risk of digging where no one wanted her to dig, but curiosity in Syloki was never just curiosity—it was hunger, it was obsession, it was a spark that wouldn’t die until it either lit the path or burned her to ash. Her eyes lingered on the stairwell where Lira had vanished, the silence swallowing the space she had left behind, and Syloki whispered under her breath, as much to herself as to the shadows around her, “Alright then… if you won’t tell me, I’ll find out another way.”

Syloki walked to her room, her boots pressing softly against the polished wooden floors of the third level, carrying her upward into the quiet corridors of the Gloam Sisters’ manor, the complete opposite direction Lira had just taken. The air grew cooler the higher she climbed, the

faint scent of incense drifting even here, clinging to the stones like an echo of the sanctum below. She kept her pace steady, eyes half on the shadows that seemed to cling to the walls and half on her own thoughts, trying to quiet the storm still thrumming in her chest after that brief exchange in the library. But her stride faltered slightly when one of the Sisters—one she didn't know well yet, the one whose sharp tongue had already grated on her nerves once before—approached from the opposite side of the hallway. The woman's face was severe, her hair drawn back in a style that seemed meant to pull at the scalp, her lips pinched tight as if her expression had never known kindness.

Upon walking by, the Sister didn't spare Syloki so much as a smile. Her voice came low and cutting, slipping into Syloki's ears with the disdain of someone who delighted in reminding others of their place. "Focus on your duties, apprentice. The dead animals in the basement won't take care of themselves." The words landed with the weight of mockery disguised as command, a reminder of the filth and gore waiting below. Syloki's lips pressed thin, and she stopped just long enough to toss a look that could freeze fire. Her answer came out flat, dry as bone, her tone stripped of anything but bare defiance. "It's not on my schedule to be there right now, you know that?" She didn't linger, didn't give the woman the satisfaction of a pause. Instead, she brushed past her and carried on, jaw tight, her mind spitting curses she dared not say aloud.

Her thoughts swirled dark as she strode away, her eyes flicking toward the ground while her inner voice hissed, sharp and ugly. *Whore,* she thought, biting down on her lip to keep the word from slipping past her teeth. Her fists clenched at her sides, itching to swing, to break the hollow dignity out of that Sister's face, but she swallowed it all, channeling it into a bitter smirk instead. "Say it to her out loud and you won't last another day here," she muttered inside her head, but the fantasy of it burned sweet in her veins. The idea rattled in her skull like a stone in a jar, daring her, tempting her to make a mistake. She swatted at her own shoulder, as if brushing away the invisible devil perched there, whispering poison in her ear. "Not now," she whispered to herself under her breath, her tone sharp with warning. "Not yet."

But then a new thought flickered, something far more dangerous, far more enticing. It started as nothing more than a wild spark—ridiculous, reckless, suicidal if she got caught. Yet the more it spun around her mind, the more it began to feel like opportunity instead of risk. She slowed her pace, her eyes darting up ahead as the master bedroom came into view. Lira's bedroom. The door loomed larger than the rest, not just in size but in weight, an invisible pressure radiating from it that marked it as untouchable, sacred in its own way. She knew she shouldn't stop, but her feet hesitated, her chest tightening with the pull of the forbidden.

She stood there a moment too long, the silence stretching like a held breath. The corridor was empty, eerily so. No footsteps, no voices, no rustle of fabric to betray another Sister wandering these halls. Lira had gone downstairs only moments ago, her presence pulled away like the tide, and Syloki realized with a cold thrill that she had stumbled into something rare—a chance, the kind that would only last a few minutes at best. Her pulse kicked harder, thudding against her ribs with a rhythm that made her palms slick with sweat. She shifted her stance, forcing herself to look calm, but inside her body screamed of the risk she was about to take.

Her senses sharpened into points, every creak of wood, every brush of air across her skin, every faint vibration in the floor beneath her feet amplified until it all sang in her skull. She stared at the door, its surface marked with subtle arcane carvings that seemed to shimmer faintly in the

dim light, sigils woven into the grain like veins through flesh. They made her skin prickle as though touched by cold fingers, warning her away even as they beckoned her closer. Her hand hovered just above the handle, trembling despite her effort to still it, the distance between her fingers and the brass knob feeling impossibly vast. She knew this was dangerous—one misstep, one squeak of the hinges, and the Sisters would descend on her like wolves. But she had come too far in her search for truth, too far to let her curiosity shrivel now. She pressed her lips together, drew a slow breath through her nose, and whispered to herself, “Stay calm. You’ve got this.” Then, with her heart clawing at her throat, Syloki reached for Lira’s door.

The door was locked. No matter. One of Syloki’s ex-boyfriends had been an expert at door locks, a charming rogue who thought teaching her his tricks was romantic foreplay. She had paid more attention than he ever guessed, and now, years later, she silently thanked his arrogance. Pulling a thin clip from her hair, she bent it with her fingers, listening to the metal groan softly as it twisted into a makeshift pick. She crouched before the handle, heart hammering in her chest, and slid the improvised tool into the keyhole. The tumblers clicked faintly under her touch, stubborn at first, but she coaxed them with steady patience. A sharp breath hissed between her teeth when the final pin gave way, the soft click of release ringing in her ears like a cannon. Her lips parted with a triumphant smirk, but the feeling died as a thought slashed through her mind: *I sure hope there’s no magical… alarms… or shit like this. Damn it, girl. Think things through first.*

She froze, hand still on the knob, waiting. The silence pressed against her ears, broken only by the faint creak of the manor itself settling in its bones. No sudden flare of wards, no shriek of spectral guardians leaping from the walls. Just stillness, cold and waiting. She let out a trembling sigh, trying to settle her nerves, but she knew there was no turning back now. Her palm tightened on the handle, her knuckles white, and with a slow twist she spun it open. The door gave with a soft groan, and Syloki slipped through the gap like a shadow sliding between stones, quick and silent, her cloak brushing the frame as she crossed the threshold. She held her breath, listening with every nerve stretched taut, waiting for some unseen hand to strike her down. Nothing came. Her chest lifted, lungs dragging in a sharp breath, and she thought: *If I’m still breathing tomorrow, I’ll know if this was a good sign.*

The room was massive, dwarfing her own quarters by a cruel margin. Where Syloki’s bed barely fit between her dresser and desk, here the bed stretched across half the chamber, its carved posts looming like trees in a black forest. The floor was polished wood, covered in thick rugs of deep crimson and sable that muffled her footsteps into silence. Heavy drapes lined the walls, drowning the room in shadow, with only the faint glow of a lamp casting a golden pool over the center. Every piece of furniture gleamed—mahogany polished until it reflected the light, edges trimmed with subtle carvings of serpents, flowers, and eyes. Syloki let her gaze sweep slowly, her lips parting as she whispered, “Spirits above…”

Two adjacent doors stood on opposite walls, subtle but distinct in their construction. She crept to the first and eased it open, biting her lip to keep from gasping. The private toilet inside was larger than her own chamber upstairs, tiled in black marble, the fixtures gleaming silver. A wide claw-foot tub dominated the space, filled with faintly perfumed water that still shimmered from recent use. She caught her reflection in the mirror above the basin—wide eyes, lips pressed thin, sweat beading her temple. She shook her head, muttering under her breath, “Damn girl,” unable to stop the mix of awe and envy curling through her chest.

The second door drew her like gravity. She slipped to it, fingers brushing its handle, and when she pushed it open, the faint smell of old parchment and candle wax spilled into her nose. A private library, dark and rich with the weight of forbidden knowledge. Shelves lined the walls, packed so tightly with books that the spines seemed to press against each other like prison bars. Some were leather-bound, others stitched with materials that made her stomach turn when she looked too close, as though they weren't animal hides at all. The air hummed faintly, a subtle vibration like the purring of a cat, and she swore the books shifted ever so slightly when her shadow passed over them. This was no casual collection. These were secrets carved in ink and blood, hoarded away from the rest of the Sisters.

Syloki's mouth watered with questions, her fingertips twitching to pull one volume down, to crack open its spine and drink whatever truths it held. But time pressed hard against her back, every second ticking like a hammer in her skull. She forced herself to step back, shaking her head, whispering again, "No time. No time." She pivoted in the center of the room, her cloak swishing faintly, and let her eyes sweep across every surface—the bed, the dresser, the shelves, the shadows pooling in corners. Her voice came low, muttered to herself like a thief whispering to the dark. "Now, if I had to hide some of my darkest secrets, where would I put them away in here?" She narrowed her eyes, scanning every angle, her gut twisting with the knowledge that she was closer than ever to finding something that could shatter Lira Quinval's mask wide open.

Syloki remembered her own diary, that battered little book filled with notes, sketches, scraps of overheard conversations, and her own private confessions. It was tucked safely inside the folds of her pillow in her small room just a couple of doors down, hidden where no one would think to look. That thought made her glance toward Lira's bed, an instinct tugging her forward. She crept to it, her breath shallow, and with trembling hands she pressed against the downy pillow. The softness startled her—so plush, so perfectly fluffed that she gasped aloud, quickly clapping a hand over her mouth as if the sound might summon a ghost. This wasn't a bed; this was luxury incarnate. The kind of comfort that whispered of someone who could have anything they wanted and refused to settle for less. She slid her fingers under the pillow, searching, but found nothing more than the silken sheets. No books, no diaries, no folded notes scrawled with confessions. Just warmth and softness. Her lips pursed in disappointment, and she shook her head, muttering under her breath, "Figures. Too obvious."

She pivoted quickly, her heart still racing, and pulled open the wardrobe next. The doors swung wide with a faint creak, and the sight made her eyes widen in an instant. Rows upon rows of clothing greeted her, each piece carefully hung, cloaks with ornate embroidery, dresses cut from fabrics that shimmered faintly even in the dim light, nightgowns soft as mist that looked like they would melt at a single touch. Syloki reached out instinctively, brushing her fingertips along a sleeve, and a quiet laugh escaped her throat despite the danger. "Spirits, your fashion sense… unreal," she whispered, a mix of admiration and envy curling in her belly. She flipped through each garment, her curiosity tugging her deeper, until she came across Lira's underthings. Lace, silk, pieces so delicate and alluring that Syloki felt her cheeks heat. Some were light, teasing, whispering promises that made Syloki's brows shoot up.

She smirked despite herself, shaking her head. "Damn, girl. Are you getting action on the side? With all this chaos around you?" The thought brought both a flare of pride and a twist of jealousy. Lira Quinval was terrifying, unstable, commanding… and yet, somehow, she lived wrapped in beauty and intimacy, as if even her most private details were untouchable and

grand. Syloki thought of her own drawers back in her room, full of mismatched socks, threadbare nightshirts, and the plainest underthings she could afford. A sigh tugged at her lips, half bitter, half wistful, and she muttered, “I could use a few tips. Maybe if I looked like this, I’d scare people and stop traffic all at once.”

Her hands continued rifling, parting layers of velvet and silk, until at last something caught her attention. At the very back, tucked behind every garment as though hidden deliberately from even the casual eye, rested a closed chest. Small but sturdy, its surface was dark wood reinforced with iron bands, and though plain at a glance, the way it was tucked out of sight made her heart leap. Her lips curled into a sly grin, and she whispered, “Ah, treasure at last.” Her voice was low, almost reverent, as if she were speaking not to herself but to the room that seemed to hold its breath around her discovery.

She crouched low before it, fingers brushing over the lid, testing its weight without lifting it. The chest was cool under her touch, a faint hum pulsing through the wood that made her skin prickle as though the thing itself were alive. Her instincts screamed that whatever secrets Lira kept closest would be locked inside this unassuming box. She froze for a moment, tilting her head toward the door, her ears straining. Every creak of the house felt like it was rushing toward her, every whisper of the air through the corridor making her throat tighten. She paused, breath held, and listened for any approaching footsteps.

Her heart pounded louder than anything else, blood surging in her ears, but she heard nothing. Silence. She exhaled slowly, the sound shuddering out of her chest, and pressed her palm flat against the chest once more, whispering, “Okay, Syloki. No turning back now.” But even as she said it, she knew the tiniest slip here would be her undoing. She would have to move fast, careful, and sharper than she had ever been before.

Syloki slowly opened the chest, her fingers curled around the edge of the lid as she braced herself for weight, but it lifted far too easily, lighter than she expected, as if it wanted to be opened. Her breath caught in her throat at once. No lock. No wards sparking across her skin. Just a simple box holding secrets that were never meant for her eyes. That was a good sign, wasn’t it? Or maybe it was the most dangerous kind of trap—the kind that lulled her into believing she was safe. Inside, the first impression was chaos disguised as order. Trinkets scattered yet carefully placed, little fragments of a life arranged like bones in a shrine. She leaned closer, eyes darting over the collection: some jewelry glittering faintly in the dim light, a few rings and pendants dulled by dust but still proud of their former shine, stacked books with cracked spines and worn edges, two rolled-up paintings pressed neatly to one side. Each piece hummed with the weight of importance, the kind of importance that didn’t come from gold or glamour, but memory.

Her hands shook as she reached for the first roll of canvas, fumbling at the ribbon holding it tight. The paper rasped faintly as she worked it loose, and she carefully unfurled just enough to glimpse what it contained. The portrait inside stole the air from her lungs. It was Lira, unmistakably Lira, but younger—much younger. Barely out of her teenage years, caught somewhere between innocence and womanhood. Her hair was softer, her eyes less lined with shadows, her smile unguarded, carrying the fragile hope of someone who hadn’t yet been broken. But it wasn’t Lira alone. A young man’s arm was looped tightly around her shoulders,

their closeness undeniable, intimate in the way lovers fit together without even thinking. Syloki's gaze snapped to his face, and that was when her stomach dropped like a stone.

The man's smile was the first thing to emerge from the painting, something carved into him like a brand, too wide, too feral, too wild to belong to anyone safe. Charming and predatory all at once, it stretched across his face like a wound that never healed, drawing Syloki in even as it repulsed her. His flamboyant suit screamed for attention, bright and bold, though the colors had dulled with time, bleeding into the canvas like a memory eroding. Even so, it was clear this suit had been ridiculous once, something designed to draw eyes, to shock and to awe. He looked frozen in that eternal grin, a mask of charisma barely hiding the madness beneath. Syloki knew that smile. She knew it because she had seen it in sketch after sketch, in crude caricatures from Doskvol's papers, in whispers painted by artists who had only dared to capture a ghost of his essence. She knew this man because she had studied him, haunted by his shadow in her research. Merrow Valesque.

Her throat tightened as she rolled the canvas back quickly, the fabric trembling in her hands. The intimacy of it burned in her chest, the thought of Lira Quinval once wrapped in the arms of the man who had become Doskvol's nightmare. A grotesque irony, hidden in this chest where no eyes were meant to see. Her fingers shook as she reached for the second roll of canvas, her curiosity clawing at her even as dread warned her to stop. She loosened it with stiff fingers and unrolled just enough to see the truth inside. The same couple again. Lira and Merrow, once more painted together, once more locked in closeness. But this portrait had been transformed. This one was no longer memory—it was violence.

Merrow's eyes were gone. Burned away, the canvas charred where his gaze once lived, empty sockets of blackened ruin glaring out at her. Across his face, scrawled in a hasty, angry hand, were words that pulsed with venom. *Liar. Traitor. Never again.* The words clawed over his features, each stroke written as though carved with fury, as though the very act of defacing his image was meant to exorcise him. Syloki's stomach twisted as she traced the lines, her heart pounding like drums in her chest. This wasn't just anger—this was obsession, pain, betrayal made visible, captured in a way that no diary entry could have ever confessed.

She rolled it back, her hands clumsy and frantic, her breath loud in the stillness of the room. The paintings trembled as she shoved them back into place, as though their truths could be stuffed away again and forgotten. But she couldn't unsee them. The images burned in her mind now, two faces bound together by history, by love, by ruin. Lira Quinval, young and in love. Merrow Valesque, young and already monstrous. And then, Lira Quinval again, older, her love turned to rage, her devotion blackened into hatred strong enough to scar canvas. Syloki pressed her lips together, realizing the weight of what she'd just uncovered. She hadn't only stumbled upon Lira's secret. She had stumbled upon the heart of her enemy's story.

Syloki heard a noise just outside the door, sharp enough to slice through her nerves like a blade, and her heart bolted into a mad sprint. Every muscle in her body locked as she froze, straining to catch the sound. Someone had just walked past, their footsteps light but steady, the faint creak of the floorboards vanishing into silence. Syloki's throat tightened, and for a few agonizing moments she didn't dare breathe. The chest loomed open behind her, its secrets exposed, but she forced her shaking hands to move quickly, neatly sliding everything back into place as if her life depended on the order of each trinket. The rolled paintings went last, their

betrayal hidden once more under a veneer of careful normalcy. She stepped back, biting her lip, and whispered to herself like a prayer, “No one knows. No one saw.”

She crept toward the door, her body tense, ears still tuned for the slightest noise. Her hand hovered on the handle, her skin tingling with the fear of wards she hoped weren’t there. Pressing her ear against the wood, she listened with every ounce of her being. Nothing. Whoever it was had already gone, their presence fading into the house’s endless corridors. Her lungs loosened just enough to breathe again. Sliding her improvised lock pick free from her sleeve, she clicked the lock back into place with precision, the little scrape of metal a sound that had once been a lover’s trick and was now her salvation. Cover your tracks, she thought, just like he taught you. Don’t let them suspect you were ever here.

But the image of those paintings would not leave her. They burned inside her skull, etched deeper than any knife wound could ever cut. Merrow’s grin, Lira’s young face, and the second portrait scrawled with fury—it haunted her already, curling into her thoughts with a grip she couldn’t loosen. She steadied her shoulders and forced her face into the picture of calm, arranging her lips into something casual, her eyes soft, her body language free of guilt. She repeated it in her mind like a stage cue: you were never here. You saw nothing. The secret isn’t yours.

With that mask firmly in place, Syloki slipped out into the hallway, her steps light and her heartbeat still hammering, though she made sure her face betrayed none of it. The corridors of the manor felt longer than ever, each candle flicker dragging shadows across the walls that seemed to lean toward her, whispering reminders of what she had just uncovered. She ignored them, her pace calm, her expression collected, rehearsed. To turn heads now, to show nerves, would undo everything. She pressed her hand against her hip as she walked, as though anchoring herself to something solid.

She told herself what she needed next was not to run, not to hide, but to be seen. Seen like she belonged, seen like she had no reason to sneak or fidget or let her eyes dart toward Lira’s door again. She made the choice fast and firm: the kitchen. The kitchen was where laughter sometimes lingered, where people gossiped over mugs and nibbled bread like they were human again, if only for a moment. It was the perfect place to erase suspicion before it was even born. If someone had noticed her absence, they’d see her now, see her with a drink in her hand, blending in.

The smell of stewed herbs and warm bread hit her as she stepped through the arch into the kitchen, forcing herself to relax her shoulders as though comforted by it. A few of the sisters were already there, their voices rising and falling in soft conversation, their shadows swaying against the candlelit walls. And among them, as if fate had arranged this cruel test, sat Lira herself. Her presence filled the room like smoke, inescapable and thick, even when her attention was elsewhere. Syloki’s blood chilled, her breath catching in her throat, but she didn’t falter.

She moved toward the shelf, hands steady, and reached for a jug of water, pouring it with practiced ease into a mug. Her body screamed at her not to look, not to let her eyes stray toward Lira, but the pressure of her presence made it impossible not to feel her watching even when she wasn’t. Syloki forced herself to focus on the rim of her cup, her lips meeting the cool water in slow, measured sips. Act natural, act normal, act like you belong. She avoided Lira’s

gaze with the precision of a thief who knew every second mattered, every move weighed on the scales between discovery and survival.

Syloki overheard the sisters' conversation as she sipped from her mug, her ears sharper than her eyes dared to be. The words drifted across the kitchen in clipped bursts, urgency clinging to every syllable. "I'm telling you, it was stolen. In plain daylight," one of the women said, her voice tight, hands clenching around the edge of the table. Another leaned forward, her tone sharp with disbelief. "How did they get to the station then?" The answer came quick, low, like sharing something forbidden. "They didn't. The train was hijacked just outside Doskvol. It was fast, in and out." Syloki lowered her mug slowly, the rim hovering just beneath her lips, her heart ticking faster as she caught each word.

"There had to be many of them, right? How can they move so many boxes at once?" a younger sister asked, her voice quivering with more curiosity than sense. Lira's voice slipped into the room then, smooth and cold, silencing the space without effort. "Maybe. Maybe not. If they are clever enough." The weight of her tone made Syloki's skin prickle, her eyes still fixed on the mug though her ears strained closer. Another voice rose with urgency, "Are you sure it was the Ember Circle though?" The reply carried no hesitation, only a grim certainty. "I'm telling you, a piece of the fire-proof clothes they wore was found."

The room buzzed with restless energy now, the women's voices overlapping, each question heavier than the last. "Tomorrow this will be all over the news, right?" someone muttered, her knuckles drumming nervously against the table. Another slammed her hand down with a bitter edge. "They are bastards if they dare steal from us! That's betrayal, Lira." The air seemed to pause until Lira spoke again, her words precise, each one carrying the chill of judgment. "I agree, and they will pay. Emberlash will get a shock next time he looks for a partner in any of the Sisters. They will have their karma returned to them. Don't worry, girls." The calm authority in her voice stilled them like a leash tightening on restless hounds, and the conversation dipped into uneasy silence.

A sudden touch on her shoulder jolted Syloki so hard she nearly dropped her mug, her body tensing like a caught thief. She turned, wide-eyed, only to find Sheila standing there, her bright smile chasing away the shadows that had crowded Syloki's thoughts. Sheila's short blonde hair gleamed in the candlelight, her blue eyes warm, filled with concern rather than suspicion. She leaned down slightly, her voice low, gentle, a contrast to the steel that had filled the room moments before. "Are you okay, Sy? You don't look well."

Syloki swallowed hard, forcing her nerves back down where they belonged, smoothing her face into something calm, something believable. She nodded quickly, answering in the steadiest tone she could pull together. "Yeah, I'm okay. Just having one of those days." The lie sat heavy in her chest, but she sold it with the smallest curve of her lips, enough to make it pass. Sheila's smile widened, soft and knowing, her hand giving Syloki's shoulder a reassuring squeeze. "You looked like you've just seen a ghost."

The words made Syloki laugh, a fragile sound at first, but Sheila's laugh followed close behind, bright and easy, and together they carried it into the kitchen's thick air. For a moment it almost felt like an inside joke between two long-time friends, a crack of warmth in the heavy walls of the Gloam Sisters' home. Despite the storm she carried in her chest, despite the portraits still

etched behind her eyes and the fury she had glimpsed in Lira, Syloki felt lighter. Sheila's presence was like a lantern in a room full of shadows, and for that brief flicker of time, she believed she could still carry everything without breaking.

Chapter 11: **Shadows in the Gearworks**

The workshop carried the same heat as always, a furnace that never cooled, its iron lungs wheezing through copper ribs, coughing out steam that kissed the ceiling and dripped back down in patient rhythm. The smell was an alchemy of oil, scorched dust, and the faint bitterness of coal smoke that clung to Arthur's coat no matter how often he brushed it clean. He stood with a chipped mug in his hand, the liquid inside long since gone cold, but he drank anyway, lips scraping the rim as though punishment might sharpen his focus. Before him stretched the slate wall, heavy with chalk and scraps, the investigation's skeleton grinning back at him in fractured lines. It had grown since the last time he stared at it like this, swollen with new names and crueler connections, each fresh stroke carved over the scars of the old. Dust from his frantic scrawls floated in the lamplight, restless as ash on a draft, and the underground machines deep in the Emporium throbbed through the stone like a second pulse, a reminder that nothing in Doskvol ever slept. He shifted his weight, jaw set, knuckles aching with chalk ground into the creases of his skin, and told himself it was only a glance, a quick look before bed. But his eyes kept measuring, tracing, correcting—as if the board could ever be coaxed into giving him the truth.

The egg still sat at the center, ugly and insistent, an ovoid sketch gouged so deep into the slate that smudges could not erase it. Vents crosshatched the sides like teeth, annotations gnawed into the margins—timing marks, angles of dispersal, notes on pressure release. FIRE and GAS had been crossed out long ago, but DISPERSION remained circled again and again until the word seemed to vibrate with desperation. Around it, taped fragments of casing, coils, residue framed the sketch like offerings at an altar, each one stabbing back at the unanswered question. New blueprints lay folded on the steel table beneath the board, edges singed, diagrams bleeding into one another like veins, their pressure lines echoing the same patterns as the egg. He had placed them there with trembling hands after prying them from a courier's case, still reeking of canal water and fear. The paper rustled whenever the underground draft shifted, as if whispering accusations he could not silence. Arthur stared at them, remembering the courier's face—the wide eyes, the sweat slick across his temple—and felt the weight of not knowing how to read the entire design pressing into his chest. The egg was no longer just a sketch; it was a wound that would not close.

Names spidered out from the egg in every direction, a network of chalk lines that looked more like veins than reasoning. Emberlash = BUILDER, underlined with contempt. Circle = zealots, deliverers of fire. Around them, the word SANCTUM scrawled with a pressure that cracked the chalk in his hand, a reminder that their schemes hid in cloistered places thick with ritual and secrecy. Elias Wren still hung at the hinge of it all, antiquities dealer, coin launderer, fence of power disguised as commerce. Arthur had drawn the triangle again and again: patron, circle, egg, with Elias dangling at the point where all three touched, the hinge of a machine no one else seemed to hear humming. But the faceless square that had once been labeled PATRON = UNKNOWN was no longer untouched. Merrow, carved in hard capitals, boxed twice until chalk dust feathered the edges like smoke. Arrows connected him to Elias, to Syloki, even to the Crows. Arthur had scrawled in smaller hand beneath the name: worse than patron, worse than flame. The thought that Merrow might be orchestrating this war twisted his gut, because it meant there was no patron behind the curtain—it was Merrow all along, and the city had been dancing to his strings from the start.

Syloki's name had appeared under Elias since the night of their uneasy partnership, and Arthur had underlined it twice since then. Reckless, friend? foe?—the question still sat there, but now new marks surrounded it. M notes, circled. Letters to Syloki from Merrow, or someone pretending to be him. He had drawn an arrow from Merrow's name straight to hers, labeled

destabilizing tool. Another arrow ran from her name back toward the Circle, as though Merrow were using her investigation as a knife to pry open the fractures between factions. Arthur ground his teeth as he stared at it; she was smart, dangerous, but she was playing a game where Merrow held the rules. He muttered under his breath, not for the first time, that she was being used as a pawn in a play too vast to see its edges. Yet he couldn't cut her loose. Not now. Not when Marcio Keel's ghost had whispered of her role, her place in the prophecy. Not when she might be as crucial to saving Doskvol as she was to damning it. The chalk circle around her name was darker than most, as if pressing harder might force an answer from the stone.

Pinned in the corner was still the Blade Chronicle headline: HORROR RETURNS TO DOSKVOL, its block letters screaming under the flicker of the lamp. Arthur had underlined it until the paper crumpled, the ink bruised into something more like a scar than a page. Merrow's grin haunted the margins of the board, not just as a man but as an infection—spectacle against subtlety, chaos against order. The idea that Merrow could be behind Elias, behind the Circle's shift from flames to dispersal, behind the stolen ember shipment itself—it sickened him, but the logic was too neat to ignore. Chaos wasn't random; not anymore. Merrow was choosing where to bleed it. Even Adrian Blackwood's name was still there, scratched in the lower corner, with a compass sketch pointing seaward. Arthur refused to erase it. Alive, offshore, he had written, because he refused to surrender that hope. Lines now ran from Adrian to both Circle and Pennwright, faint scrawls suggesting Skoulander waters as the only way forward. Adrian remained a ghost on the board, but Arthur's gut told him he was still part of this. Still caught in Merrow's game.

Arthur finally sat, the chair creaking under him, mug lifted once more. The coffee had gone cold and bitter, but he drank anyway, letting it scrape down his throat like penance. His eyes blurred over the board, until Wren and Syloki, Circle and Merrow, prophecy and egg all bled together into a single mass of lines and scratches, a net of madness that mirrored his own exhaustion. His bitten wrist ached, twitching with the memory of claws and teeth, reminding him of how close he'd come before. He dragged a hand over his face, grit grinding into his eyelids, and muttered into the stale air, "Where are you, you fucking bastard." The words clanged against the hum of gears and the whisper of chalk dust, iron-heavy and full of a man not yet beaten but always on the verge. And the board stared back, silent, heavy, as though it knew the answers and was only waiting for him to break first.

Arthur rose from the chair with the weight of a man dragging chains behind him, the stale air of the workshop clinging to his coat like smoke. The hum of the machines followed him as he crossed the narrow corridor, boots heavy on the metal grating, each step echoing like a verdict he didn't want to face. He paused at the door, mug still in his hand though it was empty, and set it down on a bench as though leaving behind a piece of his fatigue. The voices reached him before the door creaked open—Lannic sharp and impatient, Silas steady but worn—and Arthur squared his shoulders before pushing inside. The main room stretched beneath the ribs of the Emporium, a place of unfinished walls and scattered tools, the table at its heart glowing in the lamplight like an altar of schematics and arguments. Two men bent over it, and one empty chair stared back at him like a ghost. Adrian's chair. It made Arthur's jaw lock as he moved forward, every muscle in his back tight with the reminder of absence. He sat without ceremony, the chair scraping loud against the stone, and fixed his gaze on the others as if daring them to pretend it wasn't there.

Lannic's tone was clipped, a whetstone edge grinding against his irritation. "What do you mean?" The chalk and ink-stained table trembled faintly under his hand, fingers drumming as if to keep time with his own impatience. Silas didn't flinch, his tired eyes steady under the lamplight, the shadows of sleepless nights carved deep into the hollows of his face. "Exactly what I said. They came here themselves, Jack and Harry. Said the Crows were responsible for that train heist the papers are screaming about. Jack even had a smile on his face, like he

wanted to savor the chaos." Arthur leaned back, his shoulders pressed hard against the chair's edge, and listened without a flicker of surprise. Lannic's eyes narrowed, sharp as needles. "And our stolen stuff?" Silas spread his hands, the gesture halfway between resignation and disbelief. "They brought it back to us. Their story was they stole to make coin, not to bleed their allies. So they handed our boxes over, swore they were untouched." The silence after lingered, broken only by the buzzing of a loose filament lamp.

"Did you inspect them?" Lannic's voice cracked like glass under strain, his face carved into a mask of suspicion. "Did the Crows just rob me and bring me back the boxes as though that makes it fine?" Silas's jaw clenched before he answered, his voice heavy with the frustration of a man tired of chasing shadows. "I don't think so. Everything is still here, Lannic. Every damn piece accounted for. Except one spider bomb. That's all. And even then—why would they? Who breaks into a crate, ignores the valuables, and steals one minor contraption? It doesn't add up." He leaned back with a slow exhale, eyes cutting to Arthur as though asking him to untangle the knot with words sharper than chalk lines. Lannic, brows furrowed deep enough to shadow his eyes, turned as well, the weight of his gaze landing like a hammer. "Arthur," he said, voice low but edged with a need for certainty. "Your thoughts?"

Arthur's fingers flexed against the edge of the table, nails scraping wood as he gathered his reply. His eyes flicked briefly to Adrian's empty chair again, as if the man's absence might answer for him, then he leaned forward, elbows heavy on the scarred wood. "What I think," he began, voice steady but low, "is that the papers don't tell us everything, but they tell us enough. The train was hit fast, surgical. Too clean for a crew like the Crows if they were just out for coin. They thrive in noise, not precision. That's what bothers me. Either they've sharpened their teeth overnight, or someone else wanted it to look like them." He dragged a hand through his hair, the grit of chalk still embedded in his fingertips, and let the thought hang like smoke.

His gaze moved from Silas to Lannic, sharp and unblinking. "As for the bomb? That's bait. A spider bomb on its own isn't worth much, not compared to crates of tech. Whoever took it wanted us talking, wanted us looking at the gap instead of the whole. That's how you steer a story without lifting a finger. The Crows giving the crates back—it's too neat. Either they're trying to play at honor among thieves, or they're burying their own tracks under a gesture that costs them nothing. But the truth?" He sat back, lips twisting into a grim line. "The Ember Circle, maybe even Merrow himself, is laughing right now. They've got the city pointing fingers at the Crows, allies gnashing teeth at each other, and one missing piece that doesn't make sense until it's too late. That's my opinion. We've been handed a performance, and I don't like the stage we're standing on."

Arthur let the silence stretch after his words, his eyes locking on the board scratched into his mind, each line he'd drawn now pulsing louder in the lamplight of the room. His hand hovered over the mug he'd brought without thinking, then pulled back, fingers curling tight as if holding onto restraint instead. He looked between the two men again, voice lower, rougher. "We're being played."

The room seemed to sink into itself after Arthur's words, silence falling over the three men like a heavy drape. The machines in the walls kept humming, the pipes rattled faintly with the city's breath above them, but around the table there was nothing but the sound of three men staring into the same void. Lannic leaned back in his chair, one hand rubbing the bridge of his nose, the lamplight throwing hard shadows across his sharp cheekbones. Silas sat still, his bulk folded in on itself, fingers steepled before him as if he were holding a prayer unspoken. Arthur leaned on the table, his hands open against the scarred wood, gaze steady, jaw set tight enough that it ached. The weight of Adrian's empty chair pressed on them all like a ghost sitting silent at the fourth place. Finally, Lannic exhaled, long and sharp, breaking the stillness with the scrape of his chair as he shifted forward, palms flat against the tabletop. His voice was controlled, iron

wrapped in fatigue. “Well. That’s what we’ll have to work out in the future. But for now…” his eyes cut to Arthur, narrow and searching. “Arthur. Update us. How’s your investigation on that artefact going so far?”

Arthur didn’t answer right away. He let the silence drag for a beat longer, eyes flicking toward the lamplight trembling over the maps and scraps of notes spread at the far end of the table. He adjusted the cuffs of his coat like a man stalling, or maybe like a man ordering his thoughts into sharp lines before letting them loose. Then he leaned in, voice low, gravel-edged but precise. “The artefact isn’t fire. It isn’t gas. I’m convinced of that. Everything in the fragments I’ve studied points to dispersion—mechanics designed to spread something, not ignite it. An egg-shaped device that breathes into a room instead of burning it down. Whatever the payload is, it’s control, not spectacle. And that difference matters.” His knuckles rapped the wood softly, three times, punctuating the point. “Which is why the Ember Circle doesn’t fit. They’re zealots. They want flames in the streets, panic in the eyes of every witness. But this? This is surgical. Which tells me someone else is moving pieces behind them.”

He drew a slow breath, his gaze lowering briefly as though to steady himself against the weight of saying it aloud. “Emberlash may be the builder. The Circle may be the couriers. But Elias Wren—he’s the hinge. The way money and orders pass through clean hands before they get dirty again. He launders their filth, makes it look like trade instead of war.” Arthur’s eyes hardened, the lamplight catching a glint of steel in their depths. “And behind Elias, I suspect Merrow. His hand is too well hidden to pin down, but the pattern stinks of him. Manipulation through rumor, whispers in the dark that set factions tearing at each other’s throats. Our war with the Circle—its sudden escalation—it doesn’t add up to just zealotry. Not unless someone is feeding them reason to believe we’re striking harder than we are.” His jaw flexed once, a twitch betraying the frustration bristling under his composure. “That someone could be Merrow, using Elias as the hinge to turn the city against itself.”

Silas frowned, heavy lines cutting deeper into his face as he leaned forward, forearms braced on the table. His voice was low but edged with disbelief. “Merrow? Why in the Void would he bother stirring this pot? The man’s a lunatic. He craves spectacle, not these… shadow games. He doesn’t profit from sowing mistrust. If he wanted us dead, he’d have the streets painted in fire already.” His gaze pinned Arthur, sharp, demanding. “Why would he bother with subtlety?” Lannic’s eyes narrowed too, though his silence was the silence of calculation, not doubt. He turned the thought over like a coin in his mind, watching Arthur with the patience of a craftsman waiting to see if the machine would run true.

Arthur leaned back slightly, the chair groaning beneath him, one hand dragging across his jaw as if the grit of his beard might grind out an answer. His eyes dropped to the table, lingering on a scratch in the wood, and when he spoke again his voice was quieter, more contemplative. “That’s the question, isn’t it? Why. I don’t have the answer yet. But the threads keep tightening in his direction. Merrow thrives on chaos, yes—but maybe chaos is just the smoke. Maybe the fire beneath it is colder, stranger. He’s hiding something, a goal that doesn’t fit his old appetite for blood and laughter. If he’s escalating our war with the Circle, it isn’t for coin, and it isn’t for sport. Which leaves purpose.” He lifted his gaze again, eyes tired but burning with a cold determination. “And that purpose, whatever it is, is still unknown. Which makes it all the more dangerous.”

Lannic’s hand tapped slowly on the table, each beat deliberate, like a clock ticking too loud in a silent room. He gave Arthur a long, searching look, then leaned back in his chair with a sharp exhale, muttering something under his breath that didn’t quite carry. Silas sat back too, rubbing at his temples, the lines of tension drawn hard into his shoulders. Arthur remained still, elbows on the table, hands clasped before his mouth, staring at the scratches and stains on the wood as if they might rearrange themselves into answers. The room felt smaller than it had moments

ago, the weight of their questions pressing down with the heaviness of stone. And in the back of Arthur's mind, the board waited, its chalk lines whispering in silence: unknown patron, Elias hinge, Circle manipulated, war escalated, Merrow's shadow always lurking. He let out a slow breath, the sound scraping in his throat. "I must continue," he said finally, voice rough, quiet, but carrying the full gravity of a vow. "The truth's still buried. And I won't stop until I've dug it out."

Lannic leaned back slightly in his chair, his sharp eyes narrowing as though the weight of the thought pressed lines deeper into his face. His voice carried the steady edge of a man who did not waste words, measured but never soft. "Wren's a notorious figure in this city. He and I have done business before. I don't trust him, but he's reliable when it comes to transactions. Still, I'm puzzled why Valesque would be involved with him. Valesque's machinations are always tangled, but tying him to Wren? That's new for me. Wren's a man of his own agenda, and Valesque's influence is far-reaching." After this there was a silence between the men, thick as the damp air that clung to the chambers beneath the Emporium. The long table between them carried the weight of too many secrets, its wood scarred with burn marks and oil stains from a hundred nights of planning that stretched until dawn. Lannic's brass finger tapped against it with an impatient rhythm, each metallic click a small betrayal of the calm mask he wore. Arthur had known him long enough to read that sound for what it was—stress bleeding through, the taut edge of a man running too many calculations at once. The lamp above them sputtered faintly, casting restless shadows across the walls, and a thin haze of smoke drifted from a cigar left half-dead in the tray, its ember long cooled but its stench still hanging in the air.

Arthur sat hunched in his chair, his shoulders drawn in tight, the chipped mug still clutched in his hand though the coffee inside had gone cold hours ago. His gaze moved between the two men, weighing the silence the way he weighed blueprints and fragments on his board, each pause carrying its own shape, its own geometry of meaning. Silas sat opposite, broad frame crowding the chair, his hands folded on the table but not still. Arthur saw the faint twitch in his fingers, the subtle grind of his jaw whenever Adrian's absence pressed into the conversation. The quiet stretched, carrying with it the taste of iron and smoke, and Arthur could feel the tension spooling tighter with every heartbeat.

Before Arthur could draw breath to speak, Lannic leaned forward slightly, the glow of the lamp catching on the polished brass of his mechanical finger. His voice broke the silence with the same weight it always carried when he demanded answers, sharp and steady despite the restless tap that betrayed him. "Silas, what's the status on your investigation? Any new leads on Adrian Blackwood?" The question hung in the air like a blade, cutting through the stale smoke and the mutter of machinery deep in the Emporium's belly.

Arthur shifted, the wood of his chair creaking under him, his knuckles whitening around the mug. He had circled Adrian's name too many times on his slate upstairs, drawn lines to possibilities, refused to let the ink of his memory fade into absence. He wouldn't give him up, not while there was still breath in his own body. But it was Silas who had taken on the burden of the search, trudging through alley whispers and informants with prices too high for the little truth they sold. Arthur kept his silence now, his throat tight, knowing this was Silas's to answer, yet the weight of it pressed on him all the same, heavy as iron.

The room felt smaller in that moment, the walls closing in with the grind of gears and the hum of hidden engines thrumming up through the floor. The name Adrian Blackwood carried too much gravity between them, drawing every thought into its orbit. Arthur's eyes flicked toward Silas, waiting for him to speak, though he already knew the answer would be a stone dropped into dark water—too small to fill the silence, too heavy not to sink.

Silas sighed, the sound dragging heavy in his throat, and ran a hand back through his dark hair until the strands stuck up uneven, his face lined with the weariness of weeks spent chasing

ghosts. His eyes held that dull edge of exhaustion but also the burn of a man who would not let go of the trail, no matter how faint it became. “Not much has changed. My informant still says the same thing—Adrian Blackwood was last seen in that attack against our convoy, dominated by the Ember Circle but with partnership of the Gloam Sisters. Whether he’s been kidnapped or dead remains unclear. It’s been frustrating trying to get a solid read on his situation.” The words left him raw, thick with the kind of anger that can’t be vented, the kind that scours a man hollow over time. Arthur stayed silent, watching, waiting, because he already knew where this was heading. He had made the same steps, felt the same walls close in, and somewhere in the tension of Silas’s jaw he recognized his own reflection staring back.

Silas reached into his coat and pulled free the compass, the faint gleam of its metal casing catching in the lamp’s glow. He laid it flat on the table for a heartbeat, then lifted it so both Arthur and Lannic could see. The needle quivered in the air before steadying, not to north, never to north, but toward the invisible tether of blood that bound it to Adrian. His voice dropped lower, steady with conviction though fatigue pressed on every syllable. “I followed this, Lannic. Followed where it pointed. It takes me to the docks. Points to the water beyond. Adrian could be somewhere out there.” His hand curled loosely around the compass as if he both trusted and hated the weight of it, and when he finally looked up, his gaze locked on Arthur’s.

Arthur gave him the smallest of nods, the kind that needed no words, no flourish, just the brief tightening of his features and the bare tilt of his chin. Yes. He had done the exact same thing, traced the needle’s stubborn pull until it led him out past the alleys, down through the rot-slick stones of the harbor, and finally to the endless dark water that spread like a grave swallowing the horizon. The docks had whispered the same riddle to him, that Adrian was alive, somewhere beyond the reach of the city’s smoke and steel. The nod said it all—he believed it too, because his own compass had not lied, and because belief was all they had left when facts refused to show themselves. The table sat heavy with that confirmation, like the air had thickened around them.

Lannic’s gaze stayed pinned to the compass, his expression unreadable but his mind clearly moving fast behind the cool mask. His long fingers steepled together before he leaned back, brass fingertip tapping once, twice, against the wood with that faint, metallic click. The sound broke like a metronome in the silence, a measure of his thoughts as they sharpened. He did not speak right away. His eyes slid between Arthur and Silas, measuring the shared conviction in their silence, the nod that had passed like a cipher only the two of them could understand. His jaw tightened once, and then he leaned forward again, resting his forearms on the table, the lamplight cutting harsh across his face and catching in the edges of his mechanical finger.

Lannic drew in a deep breath, the kind that rattled faintly through his chest and seemed to pull the weight of the whole room into his lungs, before letting it out in a slow controlled stream. His voice carried steady authority when he finally spoke, every syllable clipped with intent. “Good work, guys. Good progress. Silas, we will enter in contact with Pennwright, or Elira of the Skarrenfolk. We will buy passage through the sea, follow that needle. I’m going to leave you in charge. We might talk to Pennwright first, since he actually has sent me a mysterious invite for an event. I bet it’s another auction of something expensive.” His tone carried the faint curl of disdain on the last words, but behind it Arthur could hear the careful calculation that always accompanied Lannic’s moves, every invitation weighed for both opportunity and threat. The lamplight made his sharp features look carved from steel, shadows catching on the angles of his cheekbones and the gleam of his brass finger as it tapped the edge of the table once, punctuating the decision.

Silas gave a single firm nod in response, the sort that came not from reflex but from the slow cementing of resolve. Arthur could almost hear the silent grind of thought as Silas’s eyes lowered briefly, the man already running through contacts, possibilities, contingencies. Plans

were being laid in the private gears of his mind, the compass needle reflected in his gaze like a secret star calling him outward. His jaw tightened, and when he raised his head again there was a faint hunger there, not desperation but a lean, sharp focus that made clear he would not waste the task entrusted to him. Lannic leaned back, studying him with that calculating calm, and for a moment the only sound was the quiet tick of metal against wood, the rhythm of that lone brass finger clicking once more like a gavel that had already judged the course ahead.

Arthur watched the exchange in silence, his own thoughts prickling at the edges, until Lannic's gaze turned on him with that precise, unblinking weight. The air seemed to narrow in the moment, carrying the scent of hot oil and faint smoke from the pipes above, settling like a hand on his shoulders. "And as for you, Arthur," Lannic said, his tone lowering to something closer, almost personal but no less firm, "I advise trying to buy some information from Ezra, at the Shadows' Den. He might have some dark market information that could be useful." The words were measured, deliberate, as though he were pushing a chess piece forward with a finger, knowing exactly where the next three moves might follow. His mechanical finger tapped again as if to underline the instruction, a small metallic click that seemed to echo louder than it should in the quiet of the chamber.

Arthur nodded once, slow and deliberate, his eyes not leaving Lannic's. Agreement flickered across his expression, but beneath it ran the familiar undercurrent of tension he carried like a second skin. Ezra at the Shadows' Den. That den of whispers and hidden knives where even silence cost coin. He had been there before, knew the weight of its half-lit bar and the watchful eyes that nested in its corners. If Ezra spoke of dark shipments and secrets too foul for the streets, then Arthur would listen, even if each word carried the price of blood. He pressed his lips together, not trusting himself to say more, the confirmation delivered with the small inclination of his head and the tightening of his grip on the mug he still held like a piece of armor against the room's pressing air.

The conversation wound on between the three of them, each voice rising and falling like careful strokes of an engine kept in balance, refining plans and circling the shape of Doskvol's fractures. They spoke of Pennwright's invite, of what treasures or traps might be unrolled in his auctions, of Elira and her Skarrenfolk with their rusted ships and weather-beaten loyalty. They weighed the needle's steady pull against the hunger of the sea and debated the dangers of pursuing Adrian into waters where the city's laws no longer reached. Arthur contributed where he must, his words spare but edged with the fatigue of too many nights staring at chalk lines and headlines, his voice a rasp that carried his unease beneath its steady tone. Lannic's brass finger tapped in steady rhythm throughout, each strike marking the cadence of choices yet to be made, while Silas's jaw set tighter with every new thread pulled across the table. By the time the lamplight guttered and the air felt heavy with the weight of decisions not yet carried out, they had drawn a fragile map of intention, a promise that each man would follow his own path into the shadows Doskvol laid before them.

Arriving at the Shadow's Den, Arthur pressed his shoulders against the cold night as though carrying Doskvol's fog in with him, the heavy door groaning like it had grown tired of strangers. Inside, the light was softer than a secret, candle flames trembling against the velvet drapes that sealed the room from the city outside. Smoke from cheap cigars and better opium curled through the air like lazy ghosts, and every whisper seemed to ride its trails, rising and falling in the half-dark as though the conversations themselves were alive. The air was damp with spilled liquor and sweat beneath perfume, shadows layered thick enough to choke, but to Arthur it was familiar ground. His boots carried the grit of the streets onto the den's carpet, and he felt every pair of eyes graze over him before sliding away again, the practiced glance of people who lived on silence and suspicion. He adjusted his coat, the collar catching a dim edge

of light, and carried himself forward with the kind of patience that looked like iron restraint, though his pulse was already hammering its warning beneath his ribs.

The bar sat like a stage at the far end, polished wood gleaming faintly under candlelight, and behind it loomed The Whisper, his face cut in half by shadow, eyes like two wet blades catching the reflection of Arthur's approach. No glass clinked in his hand, no wasted motion betrayed him—he was still, too still, as if waiting for Arthur to close the distance so he could take measure of him, strip away what the fog hadn't already stolen. Arthur's throat felt dry, coffee bitter on his tongue still from earlier, but his voice came steady when he reached the bar, resting one gloved hand on its edge. He leaned forward just enough to let the flicker of light show his jaw's stubborn set, and the hollows of sleepless nights under his eyes, but his tone was all blunt steel. "Whisper," he said, skipping the veil of pleasantries that hung stale in this place. "I need to know what the Ember Circle is planning. I've come across leads about a new weapon they're developing and its possible connection to Emberlash. Can you help me get more details?" The words carried no flourish, no wasted breath, only the sharp edge of urgency that had followed him from the board in his workshop straight into this den.

The Whisper's head tilted slightly, a motion so slight it could have been mistaken for the shift of shadows themselves, but his eyes caught Arthur's and pinned him like a nail through cloth. Candlelight kissed the curve of his cheekbone and then vanished again, making his expression unreadable, a ghost-face born of angles and silence. Arthur held that gaze without blinking, though the weight of it pressed against his chest like a thumb against a bruise. Around them, voices lowered unconsciously, patrons sensing the current that had tightened in the air, as though the room itself leaned in to listen. Arthur did not look away, not even to wet his lips. The first move had been made, and the silence between them now hung thick as a blade not yet swung.

When The Whisper spoke, his voice carried low and soft, but with the kind of depth that seemed to ripple in the bones instead of the ears, as though it came from the shadows themselves. "Information comes at a price, Arthur," he said, each word careful as though carved from the dark itself. "Secrets are not handed out lightly in these parts." His hand moved with unhurried precision as he polished the edge of a glass that didn't need polishing, eyes never leaving Arthur's, their glint sharp enough to suggest they already knew too much. "Why should I believe you're deserving of what you seek?" The tone wasn't mocking, nor dismissive—it was probing, the kind of question that slid like a blade between the ribs of a man's intent to see whether he flinched.

Arthur exhaled through his nose, a slow measured breath, shoulders set back against the undertow of the question. He could feel the weight of his own heartbeat in his throat, each thud a reminder of what was at stake if he failed to pull the right words from the air. His fingers tapped once against the bar, then stilled, the sound vanishing into the hush that surrounded them. He knew the game here—currency wasn't coin alone, but conviction, resolve, the willingness to bare the sharp truth without dressing it in silk. He leaned forward slightly, letting his shadow merge with The Whisper's across the wood, his jaw tight but his eyes steady as a bolt fixed into iron. Whatever the answer he gave next, it would have to cut clean enough to be worth the price of shadows.

Arthur's eyes narrowed, the weight of The Whisper's words dragging at the edge of his patience like an anchor tied too tight. The tone had been a challenge, and Arthur knew enough of the man's reputation to understand that one misstep could cost him more than coin in this place. The Shadows' Den thrived on delicate balances—truth traded like opium, secrets bought and sold by the breath—and to misplace his footing here was to tumble into a void where no hand would reach to pull him out. He steadied his voice, made it a blade instead of a plea. "I'm dealing with a potential disaster," he said, his words clipped, conviction wrapping tight around

them. “The Circle’s plans could be catastrophic for Doskvol. I need to understand their strategy to act before it’s too late.” The Whisper did not flinch, but leaned closer, and the candles guttered as if bowing to the gravity of his presence. His gaze pierced the dim light, eyes like dull coins hammered until they glowed, cutting into Arthur as though the question was less about information and more about whether he deserved to live with it.

“Emberlash and the Ember Circle are known for their dangerous schemes,” The Whisper murmured, each syllable soft as moth wings but carrying the menace of fire beneath. “Why do you think their plans are worth your time? What makes you believe you’ll uncover something valuable?” The words struck Arthur in the chest like the push of a cold blade, forcing him to steady his breath. He felt the pull of frustration climbing his ribs, his fists tightening at his sides, but he kept his face still. Men like this thrived on cracks in composure. The room pressed in, every shadow an ear waiting for the sound of his resolve breaking. Arthur let silence sit on his tongue for a heartbeat longer than was comfortable, then released it with words stripped to their steel. “I’ve seen enough to know their actions could lead to chaos. I need specifics—anything about their operations or future plans.” His tone had sharpened now, the edge of his weariness cutting through, and impatience flickered in his chest like a spark that threatened to catch.

His hand dipped inside his coat, the leather whispering as he withdrew a small bag heavy with coin. The weight of it felt wrong in his palm, like throwing stones into a well without knowing how deep it went, but he slid it across the polished bar anyway, the clink of the coins sharp in the hush that followed. The Whisper’s hand lingered above the bag for a moment, not touching, not yet—his eyes fixed on Arthur instead, studying him with the care of a man dissecting a mechanism, turning over its gears to see where it might catch and snap. Arthur felt that scrutiny crawl across his skin like a cold draft, his heartbeat a steady drum in his ears, but he met the stare without blinking. It was a test, and he had been tested too many times before to falter now.

At last The Whisper’s fingers closed over the pouch, lifting it with the precision of a ritual, and he gave a single nod, the barest bend of shadow. “Very well, Cypher,” he said, voice dipped in smoke and something more ancient than the room itself. “I’ll see what whispers I can gather. But remember, Arthur—curiosity often leads to dark paths.” The words slid into Arthur’s ears like nails, lodging deep where even time could not pry them loose. He watched as The Whisper retreated into a side alcove veiled by curtains of velvet black, his silhouette swallowed whole by shadow. The sound of the Den’s murmurs swelled again in his absence, but the tension clung to Arthur’s shoulders, heavy as chains. He flexed his hand once against the bar, as though to shake the weight loose, but the unease stayed lodged in the pit of his stomach.

Arthur turned, his gaze drawn to Ezra Nightshade, the man who stood like a stone pillar at the edge of the storm. Ezra’s eyes were cold iron, steady as the burn of whiskey left untouched in a glass, and when Arthur caught them he felt the world settle into a different kind of danger. “Ezra,” Arthur said, his voice low, coaxed into the steel of certainty by the need to push further. The bartender’s gaze narrowed, locking onto him, a silent question forming in the set of his jaw. Arthur leaned slightly closer, the candlelight catching in the lines of wear across his face, making him look like a man who had walked too long through fire without burning. “I’ve heard rumours of a ‘new weapon’ tied to the Circle,” he pressed, “and a possible patron or benefactor from outside their group. Do you know anything about it?” His words carried no waste, no softness, only the hunger of a man already halfway to drowning who refused to let go of the rope, even if it cut his hands raw.

Ezra’s eyes narrowed thoughtfully, the lamplight catching the hard line of his cheek as he leaned his weight against the bar, arms folding with the deliberate slowness of a man who never wasted a gesture. "We hear many things in this den," he said, voice low and steady, carrying the same edge as a blade kept sharp for years. "A new weapon, you say? There’s been talk of increased activity from the Circle lately. They’re bringing in something significant, though details

are thin. It might be worth investigating further." His words carried the measured cadence of a man who never admitted to more than he must, but there was the faint twitch at the corner of his mouth, a tell that Arthur had trained himself to watch for in men like Ezra—signs of knowledge pressed down, held tight beneath the surface. Arthur nodded, jaw tightening, and with a careful slide of his hand beneath the bar, he placed a second bag of coin into Ezra's reach, shielded from the view of any wandering eyes, even from The Whisper, Ezra's own master. This was no longer the house's business. This conversation belonged only to them.

Arthur leaned closer, lowering his voice into the shadows that clung between them. "Do you have any idea where they're storing these items or who might be handling them?" The coins had already begun to work their magic, but Ezra did not reach for them yet; instead, he shrugged, a rare flicker of something like hesitation breaking through the wall of stone that was his face. That uncertainty was almost more telling than an answer. "Rumours suggest it's related to their more secretive operations," Ezra admitted at last, eyes shifting briefly to the curtain where The Whisper had vanished. "Maybe something hidden in their sanctum. The specifics are always kept tightly under wraps." He paused, his gaze catching Arthur's like the tightening of a vice. "You ask too many questions, Cypher. Questions like these get noticed." His tone wasn't a warning so much as a statement of fact, flat as iron, but Arthur let it hang without reply, his focus tethered firmly to the trail of smoke curling from Ezra's words.

Arthur's voice pressed back, quieter now, but no less sharp for its restraint. "How did you hear about the Circle's latest activities?" His fingers tapped once against the bar, an old reflex from interrogations past, though his face gave nothing away. Ezra's reply came after a slow sip from the glass he held, the liquid catching the light like amber coals. "There is a Circle soldier that comes here often," he said finally, tone dipped in disdain. "Very chatty when drunk. He's going to get himself killed soon, I reckon." His eyes narrowed, that glint of mischief surfacing just enough to crease the edge of his otherwise stony mask. "They've been stockpiling new artefacts, and there's talk of a major job involving Emberwing." The name slipped like a spark from dry tinder, flaring sharp in Arthur's thoughts. His shoulders stiffened almost imperceptibly, his pulse kicking once in his throat, and he leaned in, pressing the weight of his curiosity hard against the silence.

"What kind of artefacts?" Arthur asked, his tone neither pleading nor demanding, but carved from the quiet certainty that he would drag the truth out, no matter how deep it hid. Ezra only shrugged again, this one slower, almost deliberate, as though to remind Arthur that some stones were best left unturned. Yet the answer came anyway, quiet but firm, a thread of revelation woven through the smoke-thick air. "They're keeping them in a place called the Veil of Shadows," Ezra said, the name itself heavy enough to seem like a key slipping into a lock. "Sounds like a heavily guarded location." The words carried weight, but the lack of embellishment only deepened their gravity. Arthur's pulse quickened, his chest rising a little sharper with the breath he pulled in. The phrase lodged itself in his mind like a nail hammered crooked, impossible to ignore, impossible not to touch again.

"Do you know how they're defending it," Arthur pressed, voice low and clipped, "or what kind of traps might be set?" The question carried a faint edge, too quick, betraying the urgency that now chewed at the back of his skull. Ezra shook his head, the motion slow, deliberate, final, as though dismissing not just the question but the very possibility of knowing. "No details on that," he said flatly, but the cold certainty in his tone was a warning all its own. "But with the Circle involved, you can bet it's well-protected." His gaze lingered a beat too long on Arthur's face, as if to measure whether the man before him was wise enough to heed the weight of that warning—or foolish enough to ignore it. The silence that followed was thick, clinging like damp velvet around them, the kind of silence that swallowed whole men who mistook shadows for safe passage. Arthur sat with it, his knuckles whitening around the rim of his glass, pulse still hammering at the name he had just learned: the Veil of Shadows.

Just then, The Whisper returned, his presence as fluid and indistinct as smoke curling from a gutter flame. He did not walk so much as slide back into the lamplight, the edges of his coat brushing the floor with a whisper of fabric, his face still half-consumed by shadow. Without a word at first, he set a slip of paper on the bar, the faint scratch of parchment against wood louder than any footfall in that hushed place. His voice followed, soft and deliberate, the kind of tone that demanded lean-in silence. "I've gathered some whispers for you," he said, every syllable carrying the gravity of secrets pried loose from unwilling tongues. "But be cautious. The Circle's plans run deeper and darker than you might expect." His hand lingered on the note for a moment too long, as if even the act of letting it go came at a cost. Arthur reached for it with steady fingers, though his gut knotted as though he were lifting more than a scrap of paper.

Arthur folded the slip into his coat, the weight of it heavier than steel despite its thinness. "Thank you, Whisper. I'll be careful." His own words rang hollow to his ears, like promises spoken through cracked glass, but he forced the steadiness into his voice all the same. The Whisper's eyes moved then, slow and unsettling, gliding from Ezra at the bar to Arthur himself, fixing on him with a gaze that seemed to strip away skin and marrow alike. It was the kind of look that left men feeling flayed, dissected, measured against fates they could not yet see. "Be wary, Arthur," the man murmured, each word drawn out like the plucking of a string. "Some shadows are better left undisturbed." The warning clung to the air as Arthur stepped back, the taste of it bitter as coal smoke. He left the den with his shoulders tight, his breath clouding faintly in the cold night as though even the city exhaled its unease through him.

The streets outside met him with their familiar damp chill, cobblestones slick with a sheen of mist that caught the dim glow of distant gas lamps. Arthur's boots echoed against the stone, each step a metronome for the churn of thoughts inside his skull. The weight of the night pressed against him like a sodden cloak, the conversations with The Whisper and Ezra replaying in fragments he could not silence. Veil of Shadows. New weapon. Emberwing. Each name snagged in his mind, barbs digging deeper the more he tried to pull them free. He drew the paper from his pocket once, staring at the faint writing beneath the streetlamp's weary glow, but folded it again before he could finish reading—better to let the words remain dormant until he had the space to wrestle them properly. Even so, unease gnawed at him, feeding on every thought he had buried beneath the guise of control.

The cryptic clues festered like rot beneath paint. The Ember Circle's new weapon was more than mere ambition—it was escalation, a swelling tide that threatened to drown what little balance remained between the factions. Emberlash's name surfaced again and again, the builder's signature in the bones of every device Arthur studied, and now Ezra had confirmed the whispers: they were stockpiling, preparing for something far larger than the skirmishes that scarred Doskvol's streets. The war was sharpening its teeth, and the city would bleed for it. The thought coiled tight around his chest, pressing until his breath came shallow. He imagined the Ember Sanctum—fortress of rituals, engines of smoke and fire—looming on the horizon like a tomb waiting to be sealed. To set foot inside would mean walking willingly into the heart of the beast. The dread was real, heavy in his gut, but so too was the iron resolve. Doskvol might choke on its own shadows, but Arthur would not stand idle and watch it suffocate.

The more he turned the puzzle in his mind, the more the name Elias Wren burned at its center, bright and poisonous as a coal flare. Every path seemed to run through him, a hinge between patron, Circle, and coin. And behind that hinge lurked Merrow Valesque, the infection Arthur could not shake no matter how many walls he built inside himself. Why would Merrow push so hard to stir this war? What end did it serve him? Chaos alone was not enough of an answer; Merrow's brand of chaos had always smelled of spectacle and carnage, but this—this was something colder. The thought gnawed at Arthur until he could taste copper, until he felt as if unseen hands were already pulling threads at the edge of his investigation. The shadows

clinging to the alleys seemed to tighten around him as he walked, reflecting not just the uncertainty of his mission but the creeping dread that Merrow's hand was already on the scales.

Arthur stopped beneath the arch of an old viaduct, head tipping back for a long breath that shivered through his teeth. The fear of failure was sharp, digging into his ribs with every thought of Doskvol's streets burning, but sharper still was the drive to stop it, to hold the line no matter the cost. His hand brushed over the outline of the paper in his coat, then over the hilt at his side, reassurance cold and metallic. With a sigh that seemed dredged from the pit of his lungs, Arthur steeled himself once more. He would need cunning, bravery, and perhaps even madness to navigate what lay ahead. But one name, unbidden, rose above the storm of his thoughts, steady as a beacon. Isadora. She had always been his point of clarity in the haze, his anchor when the city sought to drag him under. He would go to her before the night was over.

Epilogue: Black Marrow Infiltration

What follows takes place during the events of

Ashes of the Unseen, Chapter 9: The Black Marrow Infiltration.

Here, you will witness those same moments through the eyes of Silas Thorn.

Epilogue: **The Black Marrow Infiltration**

Silas Thorn moved through the Black Marrow Lounge with the practiced stillness of a predator forced to walk among beasts who thought themselves untouchable. The place stank of excess—sweet cigar smoke clinging to velvet drapes, perfume heavy enough to choke, and the faint copper tang of coin passing from one greedy hand to another. The gambling floor was dressed in finery, all gleam and polish, but Silas knew rot when he smelled it. Pennwright's floating palace wasn't a lounge; it was a gilded hunting ground where the rich bared their teeth through laughter and the underworld sharpened its knives beneath satin gloves. Tonight, every eye glittered with secrets, and every smile hid the price of betrayal. Silas kept his expression a stone mask, his stride measured, never too fast, never too slow, careful to draw no more attention than the shadow he cast.

The lamps here burned low and warm, turning the gold leaf trim of the columns into molten ribbons that seemed to drip down into the crowd. Silas let his gaze drift but never linger. A few faces caught at him like hooks—a Circle zealot with scarred cheeks, his hands fidgeting near a glass he hadn't touched. Two Gloam Sisters sat together, their black-threaded gloves flexing as though the fabric itself was alive, their pale faces lit faintly by the smoke of a lantern on their table. A trio of bounty hunters leaned in at the bar, brutal men he'd heard whispered about in Doskvol's alleys, men who solved problems with broken teeth and bloodied boots. Veylock himself stood at a remove, elegant as shadow, his presence alone tilting the room toward silence in the spaces between laughter. And sprinkled through the crowd were benefactors, the quiet power behind the city's ugliest crimes, their purses fat and their eyes calculating, watching tonight's spectacle as if the ruin of others was just another investment to tally.

The chandeliers above swayed with the gentle roll of the sea, scattering fractured light across silks and jewels, across sharp eyes and sharper smiles. Silas brushed one hand briefly over the polished rail of the lounge, grounding himself in the cool slickness of the lacquered wood, a reminder not to get lost in the noise. Dice clattered, cards whispered, voices rose and fell with the practiced rhythm of wagers and debts being spun into webs. A few heads turned toward him—some curious, some dismissive, a few with the narrowed glance of men who recognized him but could not place from where. Silas let them look and kept walking, each step deliberate. He was here for one reason alone: Pennwright. The rest were distractions, and distractions aboard this ship could get you gutted before the night was over.

He passed alcoves half-hidden by silk curtains, their interiors pulsing with quiet conspiracies, laughter dampened to whispers when his shadow cut across them. A server glided by with a tray of wine flutes, the glass sweating in the lounge's humid heat, but Silas waved it off without a word. He wanted no part of Pennwright's hospitality. His eyes flicked instead toward the far dais, where the throne-like chair loomed empty, carved into the form of a frozen wave, waiting for its master. That absence was louder than any conversation in the room. Pennwright was the law here, judge and executioner, and when he stepped into that seat, everyone present—nobles, killers, benefactors, and monsters alike—would bow their heads, whether they showed it or not. Silas tightened his jaw at the thought.

He adjusted the fall of his coat as he moved, feeling the familiar weight of the compass resting against his chest, though tonight it was quiet, its secret purpose hidden from prying eyes. He was not here because he thought Adrian might be chained in the belly of this ship—no, this was something colder, sharper. Pennwright trafficked in more than goods; he trafficked in knowledge, and for the right price, no truth was beyond his reach. Silas had come to pry one such truth from him, no matter the cost. Somewhere, Adrian's trail had gone dark, swallowed by smoke and lies, and Silas was certain Pennwright knew where that trail still burned.

The crowd pressed tighter as more guests arrived, the sound swelling into a tide that lapped against the marble floors and velvet walls. Silas caught fragments of laughter from a Circle zealot, the hush of a Gloam whisper, the scrape of boots from men who had killed too many times to be nervous now. He ignored it all, his eyes fixed on the dais. Beyond the tall glass windows, the sea spread endless and black, the waves swallowing what little moonlight dared touch them. He watched his own reflection tremble faintly in the glass, and for a moment, it looked like someone else staring back. The bell rang then—sharp, resonant, cutting through the noise like a blade. A hush rippled through the lounge. The auction was about to begin. Silas squared his shoulders, his hand brushing once against the hidden compass, and turned to face the throne where Pennwright would soon sit, ready to bargain with secrets in exchange for his own piece of truth.

Silas leaned back in his chair just enough to take in the rhythm of the room, his sharp eyes noting the quiet dance that played out between guests and the black-suited guards that Pennwright kept in his employ. These weren't common dock bruisers or half-trained thugs—their posture was military, their movements crisp, every step deliberate as they threaded through the clusters of gamblers and whispering aristocrats. He watched one approach a woman wrapped in crimson silk, bowing low enough to graze her ear with a whisper before straightening, never breaking his calm expression. The woman's fan snapped shut with a single flick, her gaze darting toward the back of the lounge before she rose, following him without question. Another guard repeated the ritual on a man in a fur-lined coat, the two vanishing quietly into the same shadowed door at the rear wall. Silas's jaw tightened as he studied the pattern, the selective culling of the crowd, each chosen plucked like a note from a symphony only Pennwright could hear.

His heart thudded once, heavy, when the third figure drifted toward him. The guard's boots barely whispered against the floor, but the weight of his approach settled over Silas like a hand on his shoulder. He didn't flinch when the man leaned close, his voice pitched low enough to be mistaken for the rustle of silk. "The meeting is about to start, it's for select eyes only. Please follow me, sir." The words slipped past his ear like smoke, polite but carrying the undertone of command, of inevitability. Silas's gaze flicked once toward the empty throne at the dais—Pennwright's absence still a stone in his gut—before he gave a single, deliberate nod. If this was the game, then he would play his part. His silence was agreement enough, and he rose smoothly, his coat shifting with the movement, his shadow long across the lounge's polished floor as he followed the guard toward the door.

The back corridor was quieter, the laughter and dice of the lounge muted into a dull hum, replaced by the measured click of the guard's boots. Silas had been told Pennwright would see him after the meeting, a promise tucked behind the excuse that "a little birdy called first." The irritation sat sour in his chest, but he buried it beneath his steady stride. Patience was currency here, and he would not waste it. The guard stopped before a side chamber, opening the door without flourish, and Silas stepped inside to be met by the smell of fresh cloth and candle wax. Robes hung from brass hooks along the wall, each heavy, hooded, and long enough to sweep the floor. A second attendant, face blank as a mask, handed one to him without a word. Silas's eyes lingered on the folds of the fabric for a heartbeat, then he pulled it on, the hood falling low over his brow, shadowing his face until he looked no different than the others he had seen vanish before him.

They moved him along again, the fabric brushing his boots as he walked, into a chamber that widened suddenly into something far larger, a congress hall carved into the heart of the ship itself. The air was cooler here, touched by the draft of the sea, and the murmur of voices already gathered washed over him in layered whispers. Silas was guided to a seat along one of the long, rising rows, the wood of the bench creaking faintly as he settled in. All around him, the cloaked figures multiplied, filling the room in twos and threes, each draped in anonymity, their

faces swallowed by shadow. It was unnerving, this deliberate stripping away of identity, as though Pennwright demanded they all be made equal before whatever was about to unfold. Silas let his hands rest on his knees beneath the robe, still, steady, his gaze fixed forward but his mind quietly mapping every movement, every whisper.

The stage dominated the far end of the hall, lit by lanterns that threw long shadows across its polished floor. At its center loomed the glass box, mounted on a low pedestal, its edges glinting sharp in the lamplight. Empty for now, its purpose was plain—a display case, waiting to hold something worth hiding and revealing in the same breath. Silas's chest tightened as he studied it, the sense of ritual settling heavier with each passing moment. This wasn't simply an auction of trinkets for the rich and the rotten; this was theater, performance, the unveiling of something meant to silence a room full of cutthroats and nobles alike. He sat straighter, shoulders squared beneath the weight of the robe, every instinct prickling like a blade across his skin.

The murmurs died slowly, thinning until the hall was filled only with the hiss of lantern flames and the faint groan of the ship's timbers. Dozens of robed figures sat shoulder to shoulder, strangers bound together in anonymity, waiting like congregants for their pastor to step forward and deliver the sermon. Silas's jaw clenched beneath the shadow of his hood, his pulse beating steady but heavy in his throat. He had come for knowledge, for Pennwright's words and secrets sold at a price—but now, staring at that stage and the gleaming glass box that crowned it, he knew he was about to witness something else entirely, something that could not be bought so easily.

the lights dimmed, swallowing the room in shadow. The conversations hushed at once, as though cut by a blade. All eyes turned toward the stage where, from the wings, a man emerged with unhurried confidence.

He was sleek in his tuxedo, hair combed back with deliberate precision, and his every step radiated the easy arrogance of someone used to holding court. A practiced smile lit his face, bright enough to dazzle, sharp enough to cut. He stopped center stage, and when he spoke, his voice filled the chamber as if the room itself bent to carry his words. "Ladies and gentlemen," he began, gesturing expansively, "thank you for honoring us with your presence tonight. My name is Leopold, and I have the distinct pleasure of being your humble host—here on behalf of none other than the esteemed Mr. Oskar Pennwright."

A ripple passed through the assembly—nods of recognition, murmurs of approval, a handful of knowing smirks. The weight of Pennwright's name was a stone dropped into a still pond, and the ripples spread through every heart present. Leopold's smile widened, his tone light and conversational, almost playful. "Now, I know what you're all thinking—'What could possibly gather so many of Doskvol's *finest* into a single room?' And by *finest*, of course, I mean the most notorious, the most dangerous, the most… visionary."

A few chuckles broke the silence—short, sharp, wary laughs.

Leopold grinned like a man feeding on their discomfort. "But jokes aside, tonight is something more than whispers and wagers. Tonight you'll be offered a chance to reshape the city itself. Tonight, you'll witness a marvel that can shift the balance of power forever."

From the wings, an assistant emerged, carrying a polished metal case no larger than a strongbox. The case glimmered as though its surface had been oiled, catching every beam of light like a lure. The assistant set it gently upon a stand, stepped back with bowed head. Leopold drew out the pause, letting anticipation thicken the room, then flicked the latch and lifted the lid with a flourish. Inside, resting on velvet, was a metallic sphere, no larger than a football, its surface etched with delicate, interlocking patterns that seemed to writhe faintly when

the light touched them. The metal wasn't steel or brass, but something stranger, darker—like it had been dredged up from a drowned city and given cruel new life.

A collective intake of breath hissed through the audience. Leopold lifted the sphere in both hands, raising it high so every pair of eyes could drink in its terrible beauty. The grooves across its surface seemed to pulse faintly, almost alive.

"Folks," Leopold said, his voice swelling with theatrical pride, "I present to you the *Ladher,* or *Lædir* for the intimate. A weapon unlike any other. Compact. Discreet. Devastating. This unassuming jewel can eliminate a target with surgical precision—and most importantly…" He leaned forward, eyes gleaming. "…leave no trace behind."

Leopold, oblivious or perhaps perfectly aware of the storm his words had conjured, pressed on with showman's bravado. "Now, I know you must be thinking—'Leopold, you handsome devil, how can something so small, so elegant, wield such power?'" He paused, savoring the nervous laughter that flickered here and there. "But I assure you, this little beauty is more than meets the eye. The Ladher has been forged with the most cutting-edge advances available to mankind. With a single command…"—he tapped the sphere with a manicured finger, producing a low hum that rippled through the air—"…it can do what an army cannot. It can end wars before they begin. It can silence rivals before they even draw breath. It is not merely a weapon—it is inevitability, sold to the highest bidder." The silence that followed was suffocating. Every figure in that room understood: they were not just witnessing an auction. They were staring at the future of Doskvol, caged inside a sphere no larger than a man's skull.

Leopold's grin gleamed like a blade under the dim chandeliers. He held the Ladher aloft as if it were some holy relic, his voice dripping with theatrical pride. "Friends, words can only go so far. You've heard the promises… but tonight, you will *see.*"

A murmur spread like a low tide across the audience. Anticipation. Unease. Hunger. All eyes locked on the stage as an assistant emerged from the wings, wrestling against the thrashing limbs of a massive orangutan. The beast shrieked—raw, primal terror tearing from its throat—as it clawed at the ground, refusing to be dragged forward. The assistant, sweating and cursing under his breath, forced the animal toward the glass enclosure at center stage.

The orangutan's amber eyes shone wide, wild with desperation. It slammed its fists against the assistant, bellowing so loud the chandeliers rattled, before being shoved through the door of the box. The glass shuddered as the beast hurled itself against the walls, palms slapping with a sickening, human-like smack. Its cries cut through the room like knives.

A few of the cloaked figures shifted uncomfortably. One man in the second row covered his mouth with a gloved hand. Another woman's shoulders twitched, as if to flinch—but no one looked away. They couldn't. Leopold chuckled, the sound oily, indulgent. "Ah, I know, I know what you're thinking—'But Leopold, my enemies are not apes.'" A few laughs rose from the room—thin, uneasy. Three figures in the corner cackled louder, letting the ugliness of it linger. The humor curdled almost instantly when a second assistant appeared. This one's grin stretched unnaturally wide, his teeth bared like a predator's as he dragged a limp shape across the stage. The figure he hauled into the light drew a collective gasp.

It was a man. Bound. Beaten. His face swollen and purple, one eye nearly shut. His clothes were torn, bloodied, clinging to him like rags. He stumbled when shoved forward, his knees hitting the floor hard enough to echo through the chamber. The thud carried like a hammer strike, cold and final, bouncing off the marble and sinking into the silence that followed. For a moment the only sound was his wheezing breath, harsh and ragged, dragging itself out of a throat raw from whatever hell had already been done to him.

The man was in a terrible state, but Silas didn't need much more than a glance to recognize him. Adrian Blackwood. The name screamed inside his skull even if his lips never moved. His stomach flipped, his lungs constricted, and for the briefest instant he felt as though the floor had dropped out beneath him, leaving him weightless, dangling over an abyss. How did he end up here? How in all the forsaken corners of Doskvol had Adrian been dragged into this chamber, to be paraded before monsters in silk robes and masks of civility? Silas's eyes burned behind the hood, but he forced them to stay fixed forward, dead still.

He had come here to buy information about Adrian's captors. He had thought Pennwright might have scraps of truth to sell—clues, whispers, a direction to follow. Instead, Silas had walked straight into the lion's den, dragged into the heart of it without even realizing until it was too late. The realization churned in his gut like acid, burning through every nerve, every muscle, until all that was left was the raw ache of helpless fury. His fingers flexed beneath the robe, curling and uncurling, nails digging crescents into his palms until the sting kept him tethered to the seat.

It took everything Silas had, every ounce of discipline, every shard of iron he had built into his soul, not to rise. Not to shout Adrian's name into the suffocating chamber. Not to throw the hood from his face, bare his teeth, and lunge at the stage with the kind of feral rage that would only end in slaughter. If he had a gun, he knew he'd already feel its weight begging him to fire. He'd picture the spray of blood, the fall of bodies, the pandemonium that would follow. But he also knew it would be his last act, a doomed blaze of resistance in a room already stacked against him.

Reacting in any way was a death sentence. He didn't need to glance around to know it—he felt it in the air, thick as smoke. Pennwright's guards were everywhere, ghosts in the dark edges of the chamber, their hands resting casually yet deliberately on the butts of their pistols and the gleam of steel at their belts. They were patient, disciplined predators, the kind of men who wouldn't hesitate to put him down before he could even draw breath to shout. Even the crowd of cloaked figures—the so-called audience—radiated a silent, carnivorous interest. Here, mercy wasn't just absent; it was forbidden.

So Silas sat. His chest heaved once, twice, then steadied into a shallow rhythm, each breath sharp and cold. The veins in his temples throbbed under the hood, and he could taste copper where he'd bitten the inside of his cheek to stop himself from breaking. He sat, and he watched. His eyes refused to look away from Adrian, even as his vision blurred with the heat building at the corners of them. He could only watch, silent and still, while his friend bled on the floor like an offering, and the chamber waited hungrily for the next act of cruelty to unfold.

The assistant's laughter filled the room—loud, grotesque, booming like carnival drums. It rang false and cruel, echoing off the glass and metal until Silas felt bile rising in his throat. Adrian was shoved into the enclosure. He crumpled next to the orangutan, wheezing, one arm twitching weakly as he tried to prop himself up. For a fleeting second, his swollen eyes flicked toward the audience. There was no plea for help in them, only the dim spark of a man who *knew* what was coming.

The orangutan, panicked beyond reason, shrieked louder and clung to the broken man, its hands pawing desperately as though begging him to help—or begging him to share its terror. Leopold didn't flinch. His smile was carved in stone. He raised the Ladher high, its strange etchings glinting under the lights, and his voice dropped into a reverent hush that forced everyone else into silence.

"This," he said, "is Ladher in its most concentrated form. In purity, it kills in under thirty minutes. Diluted… the process lingers. Days. Weeks. Perhaps a month. Always invisible. Always inevitable. The choice is yours. A swift execution, or a lingering ghost at your rival's table." His

finger tapped a button set into the device. The Ladher began to glow with a pulsing light, faint at first, then stronger, each pulse accompanied by a hollow beep that filled the room with dreadful rhythm.

Tick. Tick. Tick.

Leopold's grin widened as though he were about to reveal the punchline of a joke only he found funny. And then, with a casual flick of his wrist, he tossed the device into the glass enclosure. The moment it clattered against the floor, the orb split open with a hiss. A thick purple vapor erupted outward, curling like smoke yet heavier, thicker, alive. It spread rapidly, filling every corner of the box, obscuring the bodies inside until only their shadows writhed against the glass. The orangutan thrashed wildly, its fists hammering against the walls with frantic, deafening booms that rattled the very floor. Adrian coughed, a wet, rattling sound, his body convulsing in silhouette. The smoke grew denser. The hammering slowed. The cries dwindled into muffled gasps. And still, the room sat in reverent silence, forced to bear witness.

The room trembled with sound—screams, roars, sobs—a cacophony of suffering so raw it seemed to vibrate in the bones of every spectator. The orangutan shrieked and clawed at the walls, its massive fists hammering the glass until hairline cracks spiderwebbed along the surface. Its eyes bulged, veins bursting red across them, as the smoke seared its lungs. The beast convulsed, foaming spit and bile spraying the walls in violent streaks.

Adrian's voice joined the nightmare symphony, a strangled, tearing wail that made the cloaked audience members flinch in their seats. His cries turned to choked coughing as the purple vapor clawed through him from the inside out. He slammed his fists against the glass, weaker than the beast beside him, leaving smears of blood where his skin split open. Each breath came as a ragged, rattling scrape, the sound of a man's lungs filling with poison, drowning him slowly while he remained fully conscious. Then came the smell—sickly, acrid, metallic—creeping even through the barriers of the box. Several cloaked figures shifted in their seats, gloved hands twitching toward their faces as though to stifle the bile rising in their throats.

Inside, the orangutan staggered. Its massive body shook in grotesque spasms, every muscle firing at once in a seizure of pure agony. Its tongue lolled from its mouth, blackening, while ropes of saliva and blood dribbled down its chest. It collapsed against Adrian, claws raking his torn shirt as though begging the human for help neither could give. Adrian let out a hoarse scream, his throat shredding itself into raw, animal sound. Blood erupted from his mouth in a spray, painting the glass in a red veil. His eyes rolled white, vessels bursting, dark streaks trailing from his sockets. His body convulsed violently once more, slamming against the orangutan, before seizing into a rigid, twisted arch that looked almost inhuman. The noise dwindled. First the ape, a low keening that gurgled into silence. Then Adrian, whose last breath rasped like sandpaper dragged across stone.

Both fell limp.

The silence that followed was worse than the screaming. The glass box stood clouded in the fading gray, streaked crimson with gore, the walls dripping as if the enclosure itself had begun to bleed. Slowly, the smoke thinned. What remained inside was not life but a tableau of horror: Adrian's body slumped in a heap, neck bent at a wrong angle, blood pooling thick beneath him; the orangutan beside him, limbs splayed like broken branches, its face frozen in a mask of terror, lips peeled back over its teeth. Their stillness was unbearable. The crowd stared. Some with wide, hungry eyes that gleamed beneath their hoods, their breaths quickening with the fever of acquisition. Others leaned back in their chairs with the cool detachment of carrion-feeders, their gaze no different than if they were watching a beast being slaughtered in a pit. Then Leopold turned, smiling with the poise of a showman unveiling a masterpiece in a

gallery. But there was no art in this—only horror painted in blood and smoke. His grin was a knife, and it sliced clean through the tension, parting the air like butcher's steel through bone. "And with that, folks…" he said, his voice syrup-thick, his arms stretching wide as if to embrace the carnage. "Let the bidding begin."

It was as if a hidden lever had been pulled beneath the chamber. A ripple passed through the cloaked assembly, then surged into motion like a tide breaking its banks. Cloaks rustled. Gloved hands lifted in coded signals, some discreet flicks of the wrist, others bold gestures of entitlement. Voices rose into a storm of whispers, murmured numbers carried on breathless anticipation. The room swelled with fever, the madness of power and wealth clawing for the right to possess death itself. Gold and secrets and favors were being wagered faster than Silas could track, each bid piling upon the last, the frenzy echoing like a chant of doom.

Silas was frozen. His breath came shallow, caught in his chest like a knife wedged beneath the ribs. Rage roared through him, hot and suffocating, but he sat shackled by the iron weight of fear. Adrian—his friend, his comrade—had just been brutally unmade before his eyes, reduced to nothing more than gore displayed for vultures. He could do nothing. Every instinct screamed to rise, to rip away the robe, to drag steel across throats until the chamber drowned in its own blood. But he stayed seated, muscles trembling, his jaw locked so tight it threatened to crack his teeth.

Outside, the crow screamed. His crow. The tether between them stretched taut across glass and stone, bridging realms of flesh and spirit. Its cry split the night, a ragged, grief-soaked wail that no other bird could have birthed. It was not the caw of an animal—it was the sound of loss itself, of fury bared raw and stripped of words. The cry rolled out over the black waters surrounding the Black Marrow Lounge, echoing into the fog, a curse carried on wings. For Silas, it was the only voice he could allow himself, the only blade he dared unsheathe in that chamber of wolves.

Inside, he sat staring at the ruin of what had been his friend, the pulped remnants of flesh and bone painted across the glass coffin. His hands gripped the arms of his chair so fiercely that his knuckles whitened, tendons threatening to snap, and the old wood creaked under the strain. It felt as though either his bones or the chair would break first, and neither promised relief. Beneath the hood of his robe, tears streaked silently down his face, burning hot trails across his cheeks. His shoulders shook once, then stilled, the effort of control greater than any battle he'd ever fought.

Silas wept for Adrian in silence, his body a statue carved in grief and rage, his crow keening his pain into the night. Around him, the predators of Doskvol bartered for ownership of the nightmare that had killed his friend, each bid a nail hammered deeper into the coffin of his fury. But Silas said nothing. He endured. And in that endurance, he swore a vow—unspoken, but etched into the marrow of his bones—that the night would not be forgotten, nor forgiven. The room might roar with greed, but his silence carried its own promise: one day, the crows would come for them all.

Dramatis Personae & Factions at a Glance

The Cyphers

- **Arthur Xavier** — A Leech turned investigator, chasing secrets through chalk lines and smoke.
- **Silas Thorn** — A steady hand and loyal comrade, carrying the weight of lost brothers.
- **Lannic Morrow** — The Cyphers' sharp-minded leader, a craftsman of both machines and schemes.
- **Adrian Blackwood** — A Cypher whose fate ties blood, compass, and conviction together.

Allies & Associates

- **Syloki** — A tracker whose path crosses Arthur's, walking the line between ally and enigma.
- **Ezra NightShade** — Bartender of the Shadows' Den, trading coin for secrets too heavy to keep.
- **Constant** — A seasoned bounty hunter, muscle and mind tempered by experience.

Powers & Adversaries

- **Merrow Valesque** — A phantom hand in Doskvol, twisting chaos into purpose.
- **Elias Wren** — Antiquities dealer and fence, the hinge where power and profit meet.
- **Emberlash** — Circle zealot; master of living fire.
- **Ember Circle** — aristocratic arsonists; Emberlash lights their sermons.
- **Lira Quinval** — Gloam matriarch; vengeance made flesh.
- **Emberwing** — A Circle agent, ruthless and feared, her name whispered like a spark in the dark.
- **Pennwright** — Merchant lord whose auctions hide darker trades on land and sea.
- **Crows** — Outlaws turned reluctant defenders, fighting for survival and reputation.

Places that Matter

- **Shadows' Den** — A haven of whispers where secrets change hands like coin.
- **The Twilight Lounge** — A velvet-curtained den of indulgence, where deals are struck in smoke.
- **The Black Marrow Lounge** — Pennwright's stronghold, half casino, half fortress of vice.

The Chapter List

Chapter 1: An Instrument of Fire

Arthur Xavier hunts whispers of a new Ember Circle weapon. His ambush with Silas secures a wounded zealot, revealing that the design isn't the Circle's own but a prototype ordered from outside. As Arthur pieces the fragments together, Lannic brings darker news: Merrow Valesque has escaped Ironscar, and Doskvol is once again a city waiting to burn.

Chapter 2: Echoes of a Whisper

Syloki follows the trail of Olly from the Imperial City to Doskvol, where rumors link him to Elias Wren, a merchant dealing in strange curios. As she resolves to grow into the city's shadows, her path entwines with the Gloam Sisters, the Cyphers, and the dangerous secrets surrounding Elias Wren.

News: Mystery Unfolds at Local Science Fair: Bounty Hunter Arrested, Invention Unveiled Amidst Chaos

Two locals puzzle over the Blade Chronicle's account of the chaos at the Invention Fair. The paper paints bounty hunter Bruce Walunde as either criminal or scapegoat. Their conversation shows how public rumor and official silence twist the truth, leaving Doskvol hungry for answers the Crows know all too well.

Chapter 3: A Name in the Dark

Arthur meets with Lannic, Silas, and Adrian in the Tech Emporium to discuss the Crows' latest theft and the fallout it caused. Their talk reveals the danger of a meeting between the Ember Circle and the Gloam Sisters. Arthur volunteers to infiltrate, unknowingly stepping into a trap that will bind him to Bruce's obsession.

Chapter 4: The Silent Meeting

Arthur obsesses over fragments of a mysterious egg-shaped weapon in his underground workshop, mapping connections between the Ember Circle and Elias Wren. When Silas introduces him to Syloki, a sharp investigator hunting Wren, their uneasy alliance leads to a failed stakeout, the capture of a courier carrying blueprints, and the grim realization that a new kind of weapon is being built in Doskvol's shadows.

Chapter 5: Blueprints in Smoke

In the smoke-drenched Shadow's Den, Arthur and Adrian reflect on the rise of a reckless new crew from Crow's Foot, the Crows. Their wary conversation turns into a meeting with Rabbit's Foot, setting the stage for an uneasy alliance. Back in the Cyphers' underground workshop, Lannic unveils his plan to transport a dangerous prototype, revealing new allies, old scars, and the ever-tightening noose of war with the Ember Circle.

Chapter 6: A Daring Mission: The Prototype's Journey – Part 1

On the night of the Cyphers' bold prototype transport, Arthur grapples with Lannic's veiled suspicions of betrayal while navigating his own unease. As the convoy splits, Arthur shadows the wagons, carrying the secret of which one holds the true prize. A Circle ambush erupts, forcing Arthur into brutal combat and blood-soaked survival, even as the mission hurtles deeper into danger.

Chapter 7: A Daring Mission: The Prototype's Journey – Part 2

The path through Ashmere Hall erupts into horror when abominations descend. Jack and Harleena barely survive the assault, while Arthur follows his own way amidst blood and chaos. The firestorm battle leaves Arthur broken and the Crows staring down the true scale of war.

News: Gloam Sisters' Dark Deeds? An Exposé by Lena Vale

An article in the *Blade Chronicle*. At Bazso's manor, Bazso and Orlan Baz debate the truth. The piece underscores how public perception is being weaponized against The Crows while allies quietly reaffirm their faith.

Chapter 8: Shadows and Schemes

In a Silkshore flat, Syloki sorts through her tangled notes on Elias Wren until her search leads her to Arthur Xavier drowning in grief. Together they seek out a Whisper who summons the spirit Márcio Keel. The night ends with Syloki and Arthur bound together by shared purpose and dread, their uneasy alliance forged in fire and shadow.

Chapter 9: The Ghost You Carry

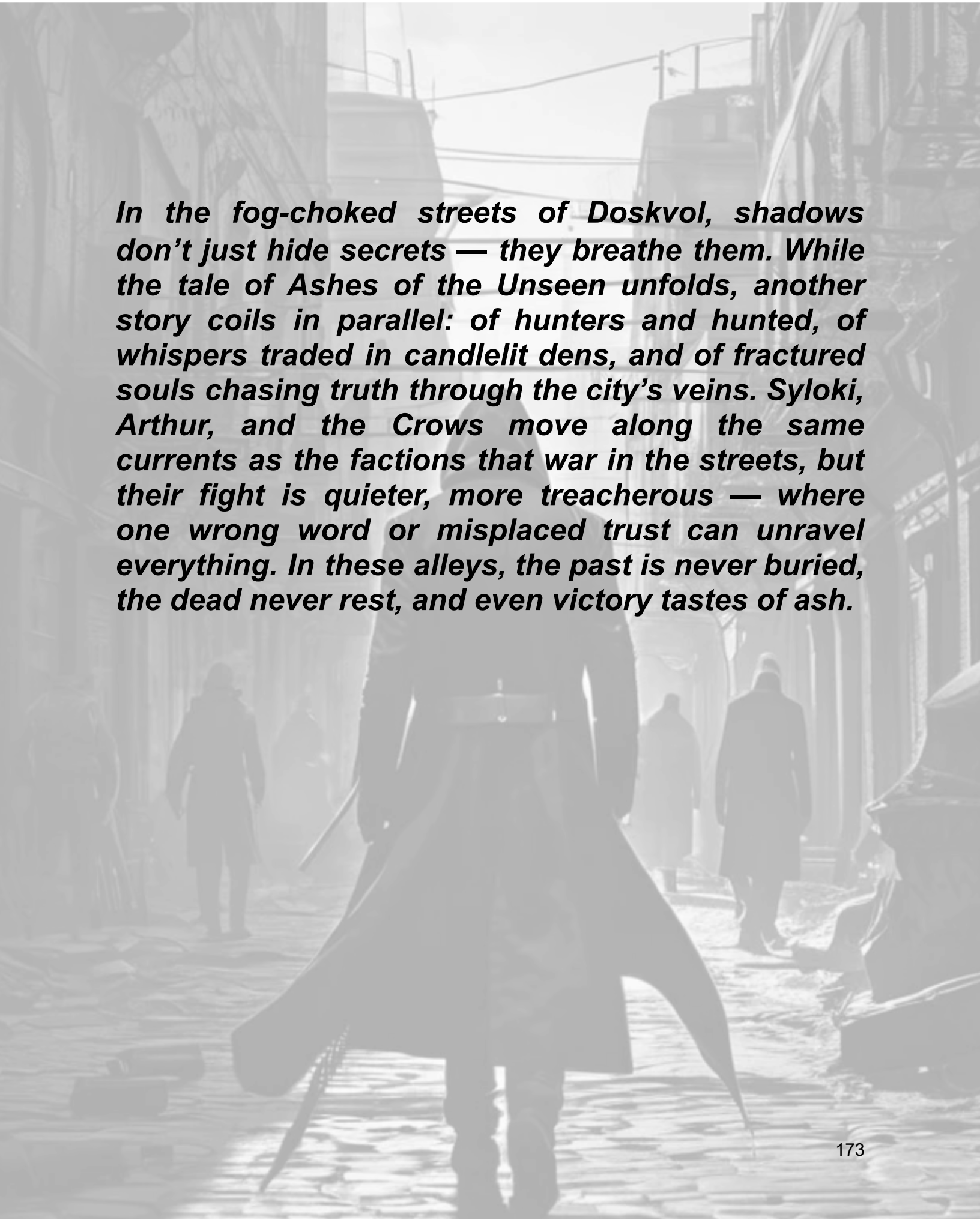
Syloki braves the Gloam Sisters' shadowed sanctum, fumbling through nerves and wit until Lira Quinval's fury nearly consumes her. Her raw honesty earns her a place among the Sisters, though the pact binds her to their secrets as much as her own.

Chapter 10: Shadows of the Past

Syloki's apprenticeship with the Gloam Sisters takes a grisly turn. Curiosity drives her into Lira Quinval's forbidden chambers, where she uncovers secrets. The discovery leaves Syloki shaken, convinced she now carries the heart of a secret powerful enough to burn Doskvol itself.

Chapter 11: Shadows in the Gearworks

Arthur obsesses over his investigation. At the Cyphers' table, he, Lannic, and Silas weigh Adrian Blackwood's fate and looming faction wars, before Arthur seeks answers at the Shadows' Den. There, cryptic whispers deepen the mystery, pushing Arthur toward greater peril.



In the fog-choked streets of Doskvol, shadows don’t just hide secrets — they breathe them. While the tale of Ashes of the Unseen unfolds, another story coils in parallel: of hunters and hunted, of whispers traded in candlelit dens, and of fractured souls chasing truth through the city’s veins. Syloki, Arthur, and the Crows move along the same currents as the factions that war in the streets, but their fight is quieter, more treacherous — where one wrong word or misplaced trust can unravel everything. In these alleys, the past is never buried, the dead never rest, and even victory tastes of ash.